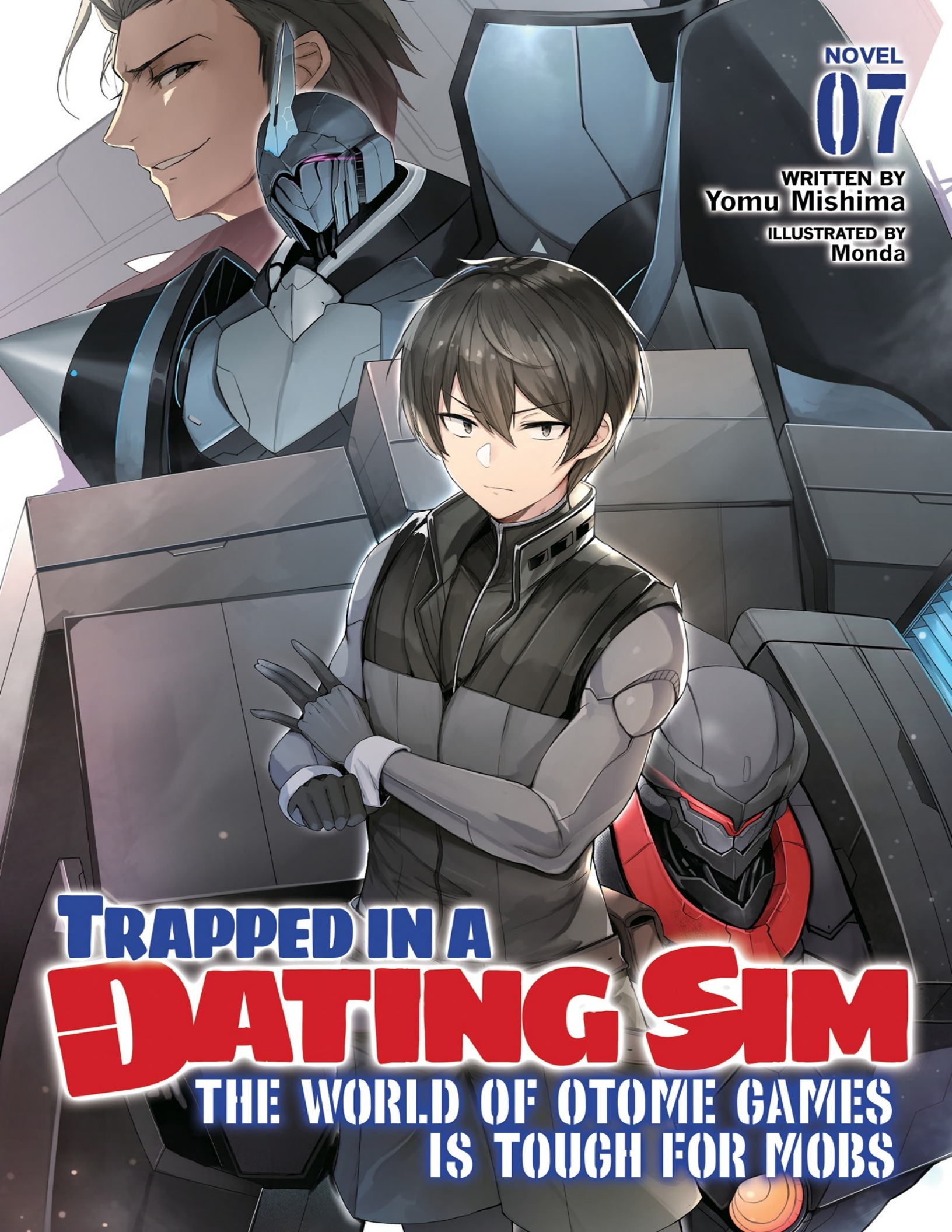
NOVEL
07
WRITTEN BY
Yomu Mishima
ILLUSTRATED BY
Monda
TRAPPED IN A
DATING SIM
THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES
IS TOUGH FOR MOBS

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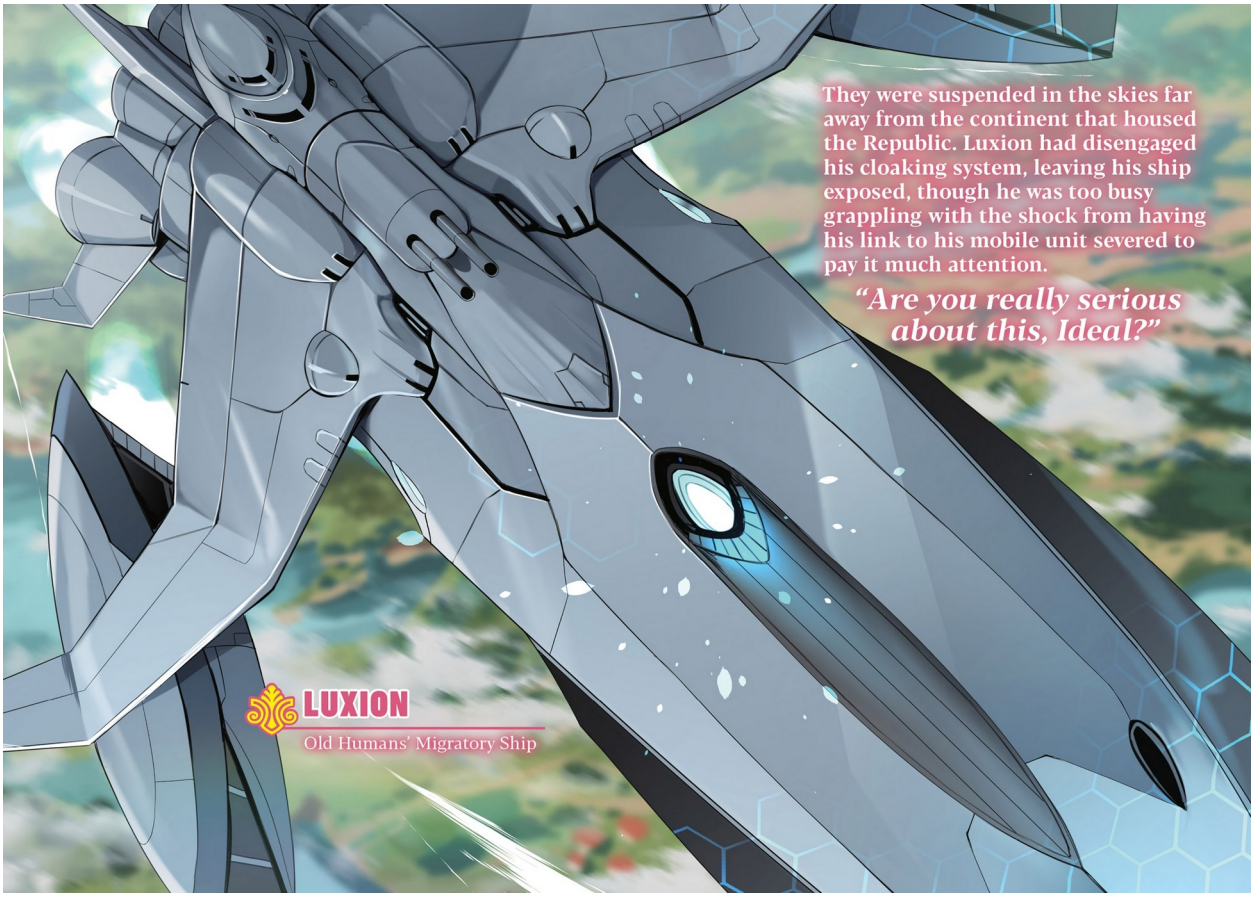
They were suspended in the skies far away from the continent that housed the Republic. Luxion had disengaged his cloaking system, leaving his ship exposed, though he was too busy grappling with the shock from having his link to his mobile unit severed to pay it much attention.
"Are you really serious about this, Ideal?"
LUXION
Old Humans' Migratory Ship

I stared back at her and finally let the words out.
“I love you too. Come with me, Noelle.”
She smiled at me— smiled and said...
“Liar.”

Trapped in a Dating Sim
The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs

NOVEL
07

WRITTEN BY
YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY
MONDA

Seven Seas Entertainment

OTOME-GE SAKAI WA MOB NI KIBISHII SEKAI DESU VOL. 7
©Mishima Yomu (Story) ©Monda (Illustration)

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RECOLLECTION Ideal's Promise

THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS.

Prologue

IN THE EARLY MORNING on one of my days off, I made my way to the market. It was located in an open-air plaza with stalls lined up in rows, and the liveliness of the people there was enough to make one forget the bitter morning cold. Sunlight spilled in through the cramped spaces between the buildings that framed the plaza, and the way those orange rays poured in made the whole scene look like something out of a fairy tale.

Spirited merchants belted out self-advertisements, eager to market their wares while stubborn customers tried to haggle down prices. The noise was deafening enough that you found yourself yelling just so the person beside you could hear.

"People are so lively, even at this early hour," I grumbled, still not entirely awake myself.

Hovering in the air beside me was my partner, Luxion, who replied, "Yes, you do have a habit of being groggy in the early hours. I suspect it's due to your propensity to stay awake so late. Please make more of an effort to lead a health-conscious lifestyle."

"I'm a night owl, you know."

As usual, I didn't bother with a proper excuse; I was hardly much of a night owl. His nagging way of raising the issue got under my skin enough that I wanted to gripe back at him, that was all. Luxion seemed to sense as much.

"Even your excuses have become lackluster."

"I'm sleepy, cut me some slack. I finally got a day off and someone forced me to get up early. Being chased out of the house to do shopping doesn't exactly put me in a chipper mood."

The only reason I'd come to this market was because Marie roused me this morning saying, "I'm busy, so I need you to haul the groceries back here." She was my younger sister in my previous life, and being treated as her manservant this time around…well, it left me feeling pretty damn pathetic. Normally, I wouldn't hesitate to refuse her request, but…

"Sorry, Leon. It would be kinda hard to carry it all on my own," said a woman's voice.

Yes, you guessed it—the one in charge of doing the grocery shopping this time around was Noelle, a girl whose long hair was pulled into a side ponytail on the right side of her head. What really made her stand out was that her hair was blonde at the top but blossomed into a soft pink ombré at the tips.

Noelle wore a normal, everyday outfit, though despite the early morning hour, she'd carefully pulled up her hair and applied some light makeup. This made her stand out all the more from the rest of the crowd, who hardly seemed concerned about their appearance. The men in particular were gazing at her with interest.

Noelle's expression didn't match her beautifully coordinated visage. She looked the picture of guilt as she apologized for inconveniencing me.
"Sorry, I wasn't trying to blame you, Noelle," I said. "Marie is the one at fault here."
"But you're helping *me* out."
My job was to act as Noelle's gofer and carry her things. She was pouting because she seemed to think she was burdening me.
As an awkward mood began to settle between us, a disappointed Luxion cut in to blame me for it. "You're as ignorant as ever, I see."
"Put a sock in it," I snapped.
"Oh? Are you angry because I hit the nail on the head? You are the one at fault here, Master. You should have known that grousing about the situation would only put a damper on Noelle's spirit."
He knew exactly which of my buttons to push. I glared at him. "Try being the tiniest bit nicer to me, why don't you? Do you really think I'm immune to all the nasty things you say to me?"
"You're asking *me* to be nice to someone who is constantly stepping on other peoples' feelings? Please, even said in jest, that's hardly humorous at all."
Do you seriously hate me that much?! When did I step on someone else's feelings, huh?!
"Excuse you, I'm a peace-loving guy. My very motto is: 'Go easy on yourself…and on others too.'"
Luxion studied me. "Are you professing to an incapability of being strict with yourself? Also, how can a man who claims being nice to others is his motto also be responsible for stirring up constant conflict here in the Republic? I sense a contradiction."
"In my head, there's no contradiction there at all. So nothing to worry about."
"You hold yourself to some lax standards, Master. It has been almost a year since you first came here to the Alzer Republic to study abroad, and you have created a number of messes in that time. Or have you forgotten that?"
Okay, sure. I had gotten myself into some mischief a couple of times here. The first time was when I faced down Pierre from House Feivel. The Republic had been undefeated in defensive battles up until that point, but Luxion manned Einhorn and made a mess of their forces, putting their confidence in their own invincibility to an end.
After that, I faced off with Loic from House Barielle. He'd obsessively stalked Noelle and blackmailed her into marrying him, but I rode in at the last minute and stopped their wedding, stealing the bride. The ensuing battle where I tore him apart with Arroganz dashed whatever remaining pride the Republic had.
The third incident involved a battle with Serge, who had tried to sacrifice Miss Louise to the Sacred Tree. I made short work of him too.

Oh, wait a sec. That means I've already duked it out three times in the year I've been here?
"Yeah, three times," I answered after much deliberation. "See? I haven't forgotten."
"I am tremendously pleased to see that your memory still functions. That confirmed, do you see no contradiction between that and your claim to be peace-loving?"
I shrugged. "I wasn't the one who started any of those conflicts. I'm always the one defending myself."
"But you provoke them so that they *will* start conflicts with you. If the Republic has made any mistakes at all, it was the decision to accept you as an exchange student."
"Oh, knock it off. You got involved and went on a rampage too! You act like this is entirely my fault, but you're just as guilty as I am."
He shook from side to side, as if shaking his head. "I am afraid that, unlike you, I'm not human. You are the one who holds the power to command me, thus, my actions are your responsibility, Master."
Luxion had a point there. I *was* the one who commanded him to get involved and stir up even more trouble. I gritted my teeth in frustration, unable to argue the point further.
Noelle, who'd listened to our mindless banter up until this point, finally broke out into a smile. Apparently she'd enjoyed our back-and-forth. "You two do get along well," she said.
"Huh? How do you figure?"
"Noelle, I believe your understanding of our relationship needs a thorough reviewal."
Both Luxion and I responded at the same time with similar sentiments. The second we finished our sentences, we snapped our mouths shut.

Noelle grinned from ear to ear. The light of the early morning sun pouring over her made her sparkle. “You can say whatever you want, but I see how close you two are.”
“You gotta be kidding,” I grumbled.
Luxion discharged a small electric shock. It was similar to the shocks often used in medical treatment—it provided an only slightly painful yet not unpleasant sensation, but it prompted a cry of surprise from me.
Noelle fished out her memo book from her pocket, double-checking what groceries we needed to purchase here at the market. “You still look half-asleep, so I figure we should finish our shopping quickly.”
Luxion lowered his voice so she couldn’t hear and asked, “Master, do you really not intend to respond to her feelings for you?”
If I were that adept at handling my emotions and interpersonal relationships, I wouldn’t be in this bind to begin with. Besides…
“Didn’t Angie and Livia tell you to keep an eye on me to make sure I don’t two-time? And you still have the nerve to tell me to put my hands on Noelle?” I whispered back.
“In Noelle’s case, I wouldn’t report it to them as cheating,” Luxion said. He sounded far more serious than he had up until this point. “If you make a move, Noelle will return with us to Holfort Kingdom. I see no problem with that, do you?”
Yeah, the problem was he completely forgot to factor in my feelings.
Noelle walked a few steps ahead of us, glancing at the stalls. It was clear she was a regular here from her confidence in searching out the items we needed. She was lively and pleasant to talk to, which made her a joy to be around. That wasn’t to say I found either Angie or Livia boring by any means, but Noelle did have a certain charm to her that they lacked. She was cute, but what really wowed me about her was her iron will.
I wanted Noelle to find happiness, but I was worried whether I could really provide her with that. Personally, I wanted her to find a partner far better than someone like me.
“Both you and Marie give me way more credit than I’m due,” I told Luxion. Ignorant as I might have been, I *did* realize that Marie planned this whole venture to force Noelle and me to be alone together. It was probably her way of looking out for Noelle, but I didn’t need her butting her nose in.
“I give you neither more nor less credit than you are due. I merely think you are spineless, Master,” Luxion said.
“I am not spineless, thank you very much.”
Luxion must have been waiting for me to say that because he immediately went on the offensive. “Oh? Have you forgotten the events leading up to your engagement to Angelica and Olivia? It was precisely your spineless nature that forced the two of them to profess their feelings first.”
“Come on, don’t bring that up. That’s totally not fair.” I cut off the conversation there. I knew that I was doomed to lose if we continued debating the point.

Noelle must have found what she was looking for as we bickered; she had stopped in front of one of the stalls and was negotiating with the owner. She wanted to haggle down the price as she was buying in bulk, and the elderly man running the place was more than happy to cut a deal with her. No way would he take the same attitude if I were the one asking. Only cute girls like Noelle could manage that.
Nearby, a middle-aged woman with a dignified presence about her was similarly trying to haggle with one of the stall owners. I glanced over at them, eavesdropping on their conversation.
“Hold it right there,” said the woman. “An insect seems to have eaten some of this. Do you really mean to tell me you’re going to sell this at the same price as the rest of your produce? Be reasonable. No one else would even buy it.”
“N-no, I mean…it’s just…”
“I’ll buy one at your normal price, and you can throw in the one that’s been chewed on by insects as a freebie. You’ll be the one in trouble if any of your produce goes unsold, won’t you?”
“Well, yes, I guess… F-fine then.”
“Splendid. I’ll take this and that as well.”
“Wha?!”
The woman plucked out a couple of others that had been gnawed on by bugs and demanded the merchant part with them for free too. The merchant gave in, if only because it was better to get rid of them than to have them left over, which meant the woman was able to net a number of vegetables for the price of one.
Maybe being cute has nothing to do with whether one can successfully haggle or not.
“Some women have real guts,” I muttered. That woman in particular made Noelle’s bargaining look like adorable child’s play.
As I watched the woman from behind, impressed by her skills, I noticed a suspicious-looking shop in the corner of my eye. It was set up within a small alleyway between two buildings, selling medicine. A number of customers would stop to browse and make a purchase, but the majority of those customers looked like adventurers to me.
“Alzerian adventurers, huh?”
Serge was the only adventurer I had really seen since coming to the Alzer Republic. Unlike Holfort Kingdom, adventurers in the Republic had a considerably low standing.
The customers dispersed as soon as they finished purchasing their goods. Curious, I ventured closer. The merchant in charge had a hood hanging over his face, casting dark enough shadows that it was impossible to make out his features.
“Welcome,” he said.
The greeting might have sounded friendly from someone else, but the way he spoke it was curt. Perhaps he had suspected I was merely window-

shopping and had no intention of buying, and was in a bad mood because of it. The man had a sheet of cloth spread out with his goods lined up on top of it in lieu of a formal stall. I kneeled down and reached for one of the products he was selling, examining it.
“This is medicine?” I asked in a whisper.
“Yeah, that one makes whoever takes it stronger. I doubt someone like you needs it, though.”
Luxion explained further in hushed tones, “That must be the medicine that Serge took previously. Although this seems to be of inferior quality to whatever he used.”
A strength enhancer was a pretty standard video game item. They typically raised your physical stats or attack stats for a short duration. The ones for sale were potions contained in small vials, and the color of the liquid within was particularly striking—deep crimsons and rich azures.
“Huh, interesting. In that case, give me one of each kind you have,” I said.
The merchant hesitated at first, but now that he knew I was sincere about buying his wares, his attitude softened. As he arranged the bottles in a small wooden box, he advised, “Be careful using them. And be sure to leave at least a six-hour window between each use. Taking them in quick succession will only destroy your body.”
I cocked my head to the side as I handed his money over, finding his warning curious. He almost sounded like a real pharmacist or something. The real reason I found it strange, though, was because using potions in quick succession was pretty standard in video games. I took my package from him and stepped away.
“The way he talked made it sound like this stuff is real medicine,” I told Luxion with a laugh.
“It’s not ‘like real medicine,’ it *is* real medicine.”
“What?”
“You seem to be under some false impressions, Master. I suspect it’s all that video game knowledge of yours getting in the way.” He shook his small round body back and forth, as though *tsk-tsk*ing at me. “The most simple explanation I can offer is this: They are basically steroids. Do you truly think a potent drug like that wouldn’t have negative effects on the human body?”
He was essentially telling me that the concept of body-enhancing tonics with no demerits whatsoever only existed in video games, not reality. That made it sound as though any video game character who spammed potions like that was a drug addict.
“What, so even though I bought all these potions, I can’t even use them? I only got them in case of an emergency.” After seeing Serge use this stuff before, I thought it might help to have some as an ace up my own sleeve.
“Come to think of it, Serge knocked them back one after another as well. Maybe the superior quality ones don’t have negative side effects?”
I’d fought with Serge back when I swooped in to save Miss Louise, and he’d taken two of these potions in a short span of time. The only logical

conclusion I could reach was that the ones he took were better made and barely had any negative impact on his body.
“It is possible that the ones he took had fewer side effects, but I also find it hard to believe that Serge was following proper dosage procedures to begin with,” said Luxion.
He had a point. Serge struck me as the rough and violent type just by looking at him, and he had an attitude to match. It was hard to believe he’d followed the proper advisories for potion consumption, which could only mean he’d pushed his body past his limits in his battle with me…right?
Or maybe it’s just that the medicine wasn’t very potent to begin with, and that’s why it had no side effects.
I snapped my fingers. “Yeah, that must be it. I took him down with a single punch to the face, so it’s only logical that those steroid things he took weren’t very powerful.” I was sure Luxion would agree with me, and he did. Well, sort of.
“That seems the most likely explanation. If the likes of you could defeat him, then it stands to reason that Serge is less powerful than we imagined him to be.”
“Okay, I know I’m the one who suggested it to begin with, but isn’t your appraisal of me a little *too* low?” I glared at him.
“You only have yourself to blame. You should prioritize training your body physically over relying upon medicine to solve your issues—especially such sloppily crafted potions as those. Considering how poorly they would pair with your constitution, I suggest disposing of them altogether.”
“My constitution?” I quirked a brow at him. “Wait, are you saying you could make some legitimately potent ones yourself?”
After a small pause, he admitted, “I am capable of dispensing such medicine, yes, but do you truly intend to make use of it?”
“It’s always best to have a trick up your sleeve, yeah?”
I decided to let Luxion analyze the potions I bought. Then he could use them as a base to craft ones that would better suit my body.
I cradled the wooden box under my arm and headed back to where Noelle was waving at me with her left hand. Her other arm was busy supporting a brown paper bag that was crammed full of groceries. “Leon, where were you?” she asked.
“Just happened to spot something that piqued my interest. Anyway, I’ll carry your stuff for you.” I took the bag from her, and the two of us started walking amid the clamor all around us.
Noelle had a slight blush to her cheeks as she said, “The estate has gotten a lot more lively than it was before. I think Mr. Julius and the others might be enjoying their freedom a little too much.” She smiled, though obviously troubled by their antics.
I couldn’t agree more. “Yeah, Julius has become a skewer-obsessed moron, and Jilk’s habit of collecting antiques is more intense than ever. All that

garbage he's brought back with him has made part of the estate look like a junkyard. As for Brad…well, compared to them, I guess he's not too bad."
Of course the topic would turn to the five idiots. Since coming to the Alzer Republic, the prince and his little minions' antics had only gotten worse.
Noelle suddenly looked haggard. "I feel like it's not my place to say anything since they took me in, but I do wish someone would do something about Mr. Greg and Mr. Chris at least. They practically waltz around the place half-naked all the time, and it's a bit disturbing." Having to witness those nearly nude figures—of two men she'd much rather see fully clothed, no less—had left Noelle drained.
"Yeah, those two are true-blue idiots."
Greg had awakened to an obsession with muscle training, so now he walked around the estate with his shirt off all the time. He did normally seem to wear a tank top at least, but he opted to leave it off after a training session so he could show off his bulging pecs and abs and what-have-you.
I'd landed a few kicks on him from behind trying to coax him into fixing his ways, but it hadn't done any good as of yet. As Greg put it, "I want Marie to see how much I've trained my body." The most disgusting part was that Marie actually seemed kind of happy to see it. She would scold him to put some clothes on, all the while ogling his body. She was as hopeless as he was.
The other problem child was Chris, who'd taken up the habit of strutting around the estate in nothing but a traditional Japanese loincloth. He'd wear a happi coat over his upper half, but he was firmly against wearing anything over the thin cloth hiding his lower bits. He had also begun to clean and prepare the bath daily like a man possessed. It was nice that he was working hard, but doing so while nearly nude negated any positives.
Jilk was the only one who'd put anyone in any financial jeopardy, but the group as a whole were lunatics. At least Jilk himself looked normal from the outside and was even pretty competent when it came to normal, everyday life—save his tendency to swindle or be swindled. The main issue with Jilk was…well, that he was a scumbag.
The rest of the guys were relatively harmless, if not a bit unpleasant in their own right. I doubted anyone could have foreseen all of them going down the paths they had. Up until last year, they had been esteemed heirs to respectable families. They'd ended up in such pitiful states that I couldn't even laugh about it.
I could manage to be nice to Marie, for all her flaws. She was the one taking care of all those morons. Though to be fair, that was her own fault: She'd tried to use her knowledge of each boy's route in the game to cajole them all and land herself a cushy reverse harem lifestyle. Alas, my sister from my previous life had miscalculated. Now she was stuck with the unenviable task of babysitting these five problem children, each one a legitimate moron. Her misery provided some nice schadenfreude for me, so treating her kindly was no skin off my nose.

“I can force them to put some clothes on if it bothers you that much,” I offered. Part of me wondered why those words even came out of my mouth. I hated those guys from the outset—they were my former enemies.
Noelle was caught off guard by my suggestion. She hesitated a moment before shaking her head. “I-I don’t think you need to go that far.”
It was still winter in the Republic, which was all the more reason why I couldn’t believe they were still waltzing around half-naked. *Do they have brain damage?!*
“Oh yeah, it wasn’t on the list, but I’d like to pick up some fruits. Leon, do you mind if we stop by one more place?” Noelle asked.
“It’s the gofer’s job to shut up and follow.” That was precisely how men were supposed to behave in Holfort Kingdom, but it turned out that things were different in the Republic.
“I’ll carry the fruit,” she said. “I feel bad making you lug everything around for me.”
Hearing her say something so heartwarming practically brought tears to my eyes. *Ah, the Republic is an amazing country indeed!*
Noelle must have noticed my eyes misting over because she pulled a face. “You know, every time this happens I think the same thing: Why do you get so emotional over things that are plain common sense?”
“Because your version of common sense is like the benevolence of a saint.”
How many times had we had this exact exchange? Noelle would always tilt her head and say, “Are the women in the Kingdom really that terrible? Those two girls you’re engaged to seemed really nice.” She hadn’t met very many women from the Kingdom. Angie and Livia were exceptionally rare among the female students who attended Holfort’s academy. They couldn’t be compared to the typical riffraff: a bunch of girls, each hailing from a family with ranks spanning from “baron” all the way to “earl.”
“It’s only a small portion of them that are completely intolerable,” I confessed. “Or maybe I should say *were* completely intolerable?”
Noelle’s head turned inquiringly. “Were? Why the past tense?”
“I left to study abroad before conditions there started to improve.”
“They’ve improved?”
It was a long story. Basically, the extreme matriarchal hierarchy that once existed at the academy was finally rectified—allegedly, anyway. I’d left for the Republic before I could see the end result of those changes, so I had no way of knowing how things had turned out.
During our brief exchange, Noelle continued searching for a shop selling fresh fruit. As soon as she spotted one, she headed over. Every single piece of produce on display was a freshly picked delight, but Noelle was intent on selecting only the very best among them. House Lespinasse had once been part of the Great Seven Houses (now reduced to the Great Six), so all its members were high-ranking nobility. Noelle was one of the few survivors of that house, and her prominent status made her the equivalent of a princess. Seeing someone of such importance wandering around the early morning

market fussing over which fruit to pick from the bunch was a mind-boggling sight.
“Mister, I’d like these here and those ones over there.” Once Noelle finally made her selection, the merchant in charge stuffed her fruits into a bag. He stole a fleeting glance at me and added an extra piece of fruit, even though we hadn’t paid for it.
“Think of it as a gift, since you two seem so cozy. You got yourself a nice girl there, lad. I envy ya.” The merchant’s lips cracked into a wide grin, and he chuckled a little too loudly. Noelle and I exchanged looks with troubled smiles on our faces. It was kind of the man to give us a freebie, and neither one of us wanted to squander that by correcting him, so we simply thanked him for his kindness before leaving the market.
Bags in hand, we headed back to Marie’s estate. It was probably around nine o’clock by this point, I assumed. We took our time browsing all sorts of wares, and the time had flown by as a result. Since we hadn’t eaten breakfast yet, I was absolutely starving.
Noelle, by contrast, seemed unbothered by her empty stomach. She was too busy worrying about what that merchant had said to us. Her cheeks were flushed with embarrassment, her speech faster than usual. “I-I never dreamed we’d look like a couple to other people. Ah ha ha, I-I hope it didn’t bother you. Did it?”
Not in particular. If anything, I figured it would bother her.
“Nah, I’m fine,” I said. “But it had to be kinda annoying for you, right?”
“Wh-what? Of course not!”
Seeing how emphatically she denied it made me all the surer that there had to be some mistake; how could a woman of her caliber fall for a schmuck like me? A day was bound to come when a more worthy partner would show up, and then she’d finally wake up and smell the roses. That was what I wanted to believe, anyway; I sure as hell didn’t deserve her. What about Angie and Livia, then? It was curious that they’d chosen me as a partner too, since they were both so wonderful. Still…I couldn’t help wondering how things might have turned out if I’d met Noelle first.
I spotted a café with an open terrace as we strolled along the streets. There were more couples than usual there, given that it was the weekend, and they all seemed to be engaged in lively conversation, perhaps working out plans as to where they’d go visit next. Among the couples I spotted one man sitting alone. He looked awfully uncomfortable. I could instantly relate.
“People seem to be really enjoying themselves, even this early,” I commented.
Noelle froze in place. She opened her mouth to say something, changed her mind, and promptly shut it again.
“What’s up?” I asked.
“I-It’s nothing, really! Anyway, we should hurry back. Rie must be waiting for us.”

Although she seemed eager to get back, I found my gaze wandering back to the café. “Nah, I see no problem in making them wait. Let’s grab some grub first! We can brag about how delicious it was to Marie when we get back.”
I knew Marie would grind her teeth in envy if we ate out. Her life must be in a pretty miserable state if she got jealous over something so tiny. I remembered that in our previous life she’d casually head out for a bite to eat at the slightest opportunity, claiming it was too much of a hassle to cook at home. Life sure worked in mysterious ways.
I grabbed Noelle by the hand and dragged her to the entrance. The staff led us to our seats and brought out menus in no time. Noelle put her things down and faced me. Her restlessness at being surrounded by so many couples was rather obvious.
“Ah ha ha, s-sorry to make you do this,” she said.
“Nah, you’re not making me do anything. I was hungry, and I figured it’d be a good idea to eat something hearty before going back.”
Noelle shook her head. “If you eat too much here, you won’t be able to eat breakfast later.”
“Psh, I’m a growing boy. I’m sure I can put it all away.” Being young had its benefits. No matter how much I ate, my stomach seemed perpetually empty.
As I glanced over the menu, Luxion spoke quietly enough that only I could hear. “This is precisely what troubles me so much about you; you’re a coward and yet you make such bold decisions out of nowhere. Oh well. Even with this romantic atmosphere you’ve created you’re still too spineless to put a finger on her in the end, so the fact remains that you’re a coward.”
He annoys the crap outta me.
I peered over at Noelle. She was busy scrutinizing the menu. “Hmm, maybe this? Oh, but it wouldn’t be good to eat too much…” It was adorable how earnestly she was struggling over what to order. When she finally reached a decision and lifted her head, our eyes met. Her cheeks grew bright red. The sight made me sad that I’d never enjoyed situations like this in my previous life. I didn’t have many complaints, though—I was happy now, and that was what mattered.
“D-don’t stare at me like that. It’s embarrassing,” said Noelle.
“Huh? What part of it is embarrassing?”
“You watching me fuss over what to order.”
I couldn’t help but chuckle.
“Why are you laughing?!”
I shrugged. “Nothing, I just thought that was cute. Anyway, why don’t we order?”
Noelle pulled a face, but no matter how grumpy she tried to make herself look, her voice was too bright to fool me. “You’re such a big meanie, you know. *And* you’re a bigger womanizer than you let on.”
“I’m a kind and upstanding young man who fails to assert himself on occasion. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“And a liar too! The way you deceived Louise before was especially scummy.” As much as she roasted me, she never took it to the point of true criticism.
“Lying for someone else’s sake is a true burden upon my honest heart,” I told her. “You should be trying to comfort me.”
“You’re so over-the-top about it, it’s actually kind of endearing. Though I suppose it doesn’t matter…”
The conversation ended there for the moment, and I took the opportunity to raise my hand and flag down a waiter. The man I’d identified as a kindred spirit earlier glared at me and clicked his tongue in annoyance. I was the only one who considered us similar, it seemed; from his perspective, we must look like any other couple.
Luxion muttered, “You appear to be enjoying yourself. I don’t suppose you would mind if I counted *this* as two-timing?”
Please, lay off that. We’re just two good friends going out for a spot of breakfast, ’kay?

Chapter 1:
Mother and Son

THE ACADEMY in Alzer was entering its third term. It was still chilly outside, and by the time school ended, it was already fairly dark. Students who had no club activities immediately headed home once classes ended, leaving only the school staff and a select few students. I was among the latter group, dragging Marie along behind me as we arrived at what resembled a student guidance room.

Professor Clement was waiting inside. A hulking figure with bulging muscles, he was your typical masculine nice guy in every way. Ha ha, only kidding! Well, the bulging muscles part was accurate, but the rest was a load of baloney; he actually spoke effeminately and had a super tight shirt that clung to every curve of his body. His dark five o'clock shadow hinted that he could grow an impressive beard if he wanted. He was a kind teacher, though, all appearances aside.

"Heya," I greeted him casually as I slipped into the room. "Hm? You're the only one here, Professor?"

Marie was noticeably irked that the person she'd hoped to find here was absent. Professor Clement folded his thick, muscly arms and plopped down into his chair. "Oh, honey, Lady Lelia can't make it yet." The fact that he looked so stern and yet sounded so girly made for an unforgettable impression.

Marie and I glanced at one another, then shrugged our shoulders and took our seats in the chairs provided to us. We decided to kill some time while we waited by chatting with him.

"You know, I had no idea you were once a knight for House Lespinasse," I said.

His expression turned nostalgic. "Dear me, Lady Noelle didn't remember me either. Quite unfortunate, I must admit, but the girls were only five when we parted ways. I can't blame them."

Marie languidly slumped her body over the desk in front of her. "I dunno, someone who stands out as much as you? It'd be stranger if they forgot. Anyway, what do you plan to do now?"

Without missing a beat, he said, "I will remain by Lady Lelia's side and protect her. As for Lady Noelle, I can't imagine I have much to worry about as long as you're with her, Mr. Leon. You are the Guardian of the Sacred Tree Sapling, after all."

Guardian was a title bestowed upon a person who'd received the greatest divine blessing that the Sacred Tree had to offer. The tree gave that blessing to whomever it deemed most fit to protect them. How it originally played out in the second installment of this otome series was that one of the love interests was selected to serve as Guardian. That same guy was also

intended to end up with Noelle. Since that fell through, our entire plan had been thrown off the rails.
I glanced at the clock. It was well past the time we'd agreed to meet. Lelia Beltre—or Lelia Zel Lespinasse, as she was now known—was supposed to join us so we could discuss our future plans. Like us, she was a Japanese person who had reincarnated into this otome game, specifically into the Alzer Republic.
"Lelia sure is late, isn't she?"
Seeing how fidgety I was getting, Professor Clement gave an apologetic frown. "I'm sorry about this, honey, but Lady Lelia is a busy gal. The Republic's juggling a bunch of its own problems right now, and what with her being officially recognized as an orphaned survivor of the Lespinasses… you must understand, it's hard for her to find the time to meet you like this."
Right. Lelia hadn't reincarnated into a regular citizen of the Alzer Republic—she was reborn into the once high-ranking Lespinasse family as Noelle's younger twin sister. She and Noelle were the only survivors after the house met its demise, and she'd grown increasingly preoccupied ever since that became public knowledge.
"Yeah, well I'm busy too, you know!" Marie snapped. "I want to hurry home and get started on making dinner. At this rate, Julius will start cooking up some skewers again instead. We *literally* just had them! I need something else before I go crazy!"
Julius was always on the lookout for an opportunity to "prepare dinner," which was really just his excuse to make skewers. This wasn't a once or twice a month kinda deal, either. He was so obsessed with eating them that he wanted them practically every day. Both Marie and I were sick of it. Sure, it was nice of him to make a meal for everyone. And to his credit, he cleaned up after himself…or rather, he snapped at anyone who tried to touch any of his cooking implements, so we had no choice but to leave him to handle it. That was a huge improvement compared to his previous conduct, which amounted to helping with none of the chores whatsoever. Even if he helped out with every chore under the sun, it wouldn't make Marie and I more eager to eat skewers every single day.
Bewildered by Marie's sudden outburst, Professor Clement repeated his apology. "I really am sorry, dearies. Mr. Emile has needed to attend to matters more frequently lately, and Lady Lelia has to leave the house for those as well."
Marie sighed. "Emile again? Well, I guess I can't fuss too much. They are engaged."
Emile Laz Pleven was indeed Lelia's fiancé, and one of the love interests of the game. The player could end up with him even if they flubbed a number of things, allowing them to make it to an ending without an abrupt "Game Over." Players dubbed him "Easy-Pick Emile" as a result. A rather unfortunate epithet.

We continued our talk with Professor Clement as we waited. Before long, footsteps came echoing down the hallway—and then the door burst open rather violently. Lelia stood on the threshold, puffing for breath. Her hair was styled in the same side ponytail as Noelle's, but Lelia's hair was straight and smooth. Unlike her sister's, it was uniformly pink throughout with no blonde ombré. The differences didn't stop there; her gaze was sharp and scrutinizing, lacking anything of Noelle's soft demeanor. The two were twins, so naturally they looked quite similar, but Lelia's chest was (as far as I could tell) slightly less endowed. I assumed that her more slender and petite stature had something to do with that.

A round robot floated beside Lelia: Ideal. He visibly resembled Luxion, though his colors differed; he had a blue body and a single red eye. He used it to peer at us, shifting it up and down in greeting.

Lelia spared us only a cursory glance before she shifted her gaze to Professor Clement. "Sorry, but I'm going to have to cancel this little meeting. Emile is out front with a car waiting. Clement, you come too."

"Lady Lelia? If I'm not mistaken, sweetie, I was pretty sure you didn't have any other plans today?" He spoke as if he was acting as her secretary and managing her schedule. It certainly was odd that she would have plans that he didn't know about.

Marie leaped out of her chair and thrust a finger in Lelia's direction. When she spoke, her voice cracked through the air like a whip. "Don't you dare ignore us! We have a lot to talk with you about, y'know!"

Yes, we had plenty to discuss: particularly the future of the Alzer Republic, where the entire second installment of the otome series took place. We also needed to talk about Noelle and the other love interests, most notably that one of them—Serge—had gone missing. He was a member of House Rault, one of the Six Great Houses, and their intended heir. Unfortunately, his current whereabouts were unknown.

There was a veritable mountain of topics we needed to go over, but Lelia seemed too preoccupied with other things to sit down with us. She also seemed displeased that her original plans had been disrupted, for whatever that was worth.

"Yeah, well I've got my own problems to deal with right now! And Emile begged me to go with him, so…" Lelia glanced at Ideal.

Ideal turned his gaze to me…no, he was actually eyeing Luxion, who had hidden himself nearby. "Our sincerest apologies. Lady Lelia has no choice but to excuse herself from this appointment in order to protect her status in society."

Her status in society, huh? We couldn't argue much if her social position was on the line. Every person had their own life and circumstances, and few would readily gamble it all, not even for a cause as noble as world peace. Marie nor I would take that risk, so we had no room to criticize Lelia. We had to accept her decision to cancel.

"You better make sure to set aside some time for us later," I insisted.

“Yes, we will certainly be sure to do that,” said Ideal. “Now, Lady Lelia, Lord Emile awaits.”
Lelia reluctantly heeded his word and turned toward the door. She didn’t seem entirely pleased with this arrangement either. She glanced briefly at us and said, “I’m leaving now, but keep searching for Serge, okay?”
Marie put one hand on her hip and shooed Lelia toward the door with the other. “We get it, already. Hurry up and go to Emile.”
Professor Clement gave us another apology after Lelia vanished through the door, clearly feeling bad about wasting our time. This wasn’t the first time she’d stood us up, and it certainly wouldn’t be the last; we were agonizingly aware of how hard it was to consult each other as we needed.

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Marie and I boarded the tram on our way home as its only passengers. The inside of the tram was lit well enough, but it was growing dark outside. Nightfall was already upon us.
Marie was still grumpy about Lelia skipping out on our meeting. She got that the circumstances were beyond even Lelia’s control, but that didn’t stop her from being openly disgruntled. “How come we have to take orders from her, huh?! Wasn’t she the one who was so buddy-buddy with Serge to begin with? We’re not her little servants!”
I shrugged. “That’s just how it goes. She has her image to uphold. You get that, right?”
“I mean, I *do*, but…”
Social status wasn’t something to be underestimated. Sure, fiction often made light of it, but it was a critically important element in reality. Maybe not so much for the star of the show, but for background characters like us? We couldn’t live our lives without heeding the hierarchy. Japan wasn’t dissimilar with its social classes, but this world was leagues behind Japan in a cultural sense. Status was even more important here.
“So it doesn’t grind your gears?” Marie asked.
“Sure it does, but I’m more mature than you, so I don’t let it show. Anyway, Luxion, kinda odd how you’ve been looking for Serge this entire time and haven’t found him. What’s up with that?”
Luxion *and* Ideal were supposedly looking for him, but time had trickled by since the beginning of the third term, and they’d found neither hide nor hair of Serge. Luxion kept himself camouflaged from view as he responded, “He’s either already fled the country, or he’s lying low somewhere beneath our notice.”
It’d be a major pain if Serge had left the Republic’s borders, but even if he hadn’t, it was troubling that he’d evaded both Ideal and Luxion’s notice. Serge was a bit of a wild child in the game. He admired adventurers and longed to be one himself. Perhaps describing him as a “wild child” made

him sound endearing, but don't get the wrong idea. The way I saw it, he was a violent and unhinged liability.
Marie perked up, intrigued by our exchange. "What are you guys talking about?"
"Serge. You know, I could understand if Mr. Albergue was a terrible human being and that caused Serge to become so twisted, but I know the guy. He seems like a decent dude."
"Questionable as your standards are, I agree. It's weird. Serge seems way too hostile to me. And another thing! He was so strong in combat in the game, but someone like you comes along and knocks him flat with a single punch? Serious turn off."
"Hey now, hold it. Just how little do you think of me, huh? I'd like to remind you I was the son of a poor noble house. Do you know how much I had to fight to climb my way up to where I am?"
It might not have seemed like it, but I'd poured my very blood, sweat, and tears into keeping afloat at the academy. There were events virtually every day, and guys like me had to send girls a constant stream of gifts. Us pitiable noble boys were forced to go dungeon diving to scrounge up enough money to afford them: The further you ventured into a dungeon, the more dangerous it was and the more coin you could fill your pockets with. We had to team up so we could safely make our way there and cash in. And what was it all for? Marriage! It was no joke to say I'd literally shed blood to fulfill my duty. I felt like crying from the mere memory.
"But the girls sold all those gifts off at pawn shops," said Marie.
"Yeah, I'm well aware. I shed plenty of tears with my friends over the fact. What I'm saying is, unlike Serge, I didn't go adventuring for the kicks!" Quite the opposite, in fact. I did it to maintain status and get married!
That's a pretty pathetic reason, now that I think about it.
Marie seemed bored by my little speech. She was more preoccupied feeling sorry for Serge. "It was kinda heartless of you to knock him out with one hit like that, don't you think? Men are such a pain when their pride is shattered. Like, because that's all they have—their pride."
"You have no place talking about men," I grumbled.
"Oh? I think I know a lot more about them than you do. Most men stake all their pride on stupid things. It makes them easy to manipulate."
Forget the part where you were hoodwinked by one such man, did you? I couldn't help snorting with laughter thinking about the irony of it all.
My mirth seemed to get under Marie's skin because she glared at me. "Got something you wanna say?"
"Not really. It was incredibly enlightening, that's all—getting schooled by a woman so confident in her knowledge of men. A woman who got herself in a lousy situation because of one, no less."
"You know exactly how to tick me off, you big spineless coward!"
"Keep it up and I'll cut you off financially," I threatened. That was my last resort for dodging out of what would otherwise be a troublesome squabble.

Marie slumped to the floor, prostrating herself. “Oh, wise and brave elder brother! Please, I beg you, don’t cut off my living expenses! Like, seriously, though, I can’t live without your help. The five lunkheads aside, I couldn’t bear to leave Kyle and Carla high and dry. I’m begging you, Big Bro! Help me!”
I had an unfortunate inability to ignore pleas for aid. Marie’s suffering would hardly keep me up at night, but I wanted to avoid causing Kyle and Carla any trouble. As for the five morons? They were like cockroaches. They’d find a way to make it even if I left them to die.
“Glad to see you understand your place,” I said with a dark chuckle.
Marie growled under her breath. The turnaround had left her vexed.
After watching our exchange, Luxion gave one of his customary quips. “I see your soft spot for Marie hasn’t changed at all, Master.”
“I try to be nice to everyone, pretty much.”
“I’m not sure that it counts as ‘nice’ to continue beating on a defeated enemy until their pride is in shreds. Serge resents you for that, no doubt,” said Luxion.
“Hey, as far as I’m concerned, it’s his fault for losing.”
“Impressive words for someone who borrowed my power to win. Don’t you find that underhanded?”
I shook my head. “Not in the least. Besides, I seem to recall someone saying something to me once before…about how being underhanded is a compliment.”
“I’m sure other people would be revolted to hear that, if you’re the one saying it.”
“Hah! Even though I’m such a kind person?!”
Marie pulled a face, as if to say, *What kinda nonsense are you guys spewing right now?* I elected to ignore her.
The tram finally pulled up to the station close to the estate, so we disembarked.

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Marie was living in a lavish estate here in the Republic. I’d been crashing there with her, mainly because there wasn’t much time before our stay came to an end, but also because keeping a separate residence was kind of a pain these days.
The moment we entered the mansion, Miss Yumeria rushed toward me in a hurry. “Welcome home, Mr. Leon—aaah!” She was in such a rush that she tripped and crashed to the floor, sending both legs flying up into the air. It looked pretty painful.
“A-are you okay?” I asked, worried.
Her cheeks flushed. She hung her head, her eyes misting over as she squeaked out, “I’m alri-ah-ink.”

Miss Yumeria, who had mangled her enunciation with all the adorable grace of her fall, was a petite elf woman with ample breasts. She looked pretty young from the outside, practically the same age as us, but she already had a child of her own. Her eyes were a soft amber color, and her long, pointed ears poked through the curtain of straight green hair that framed her face. Despite her clumsiness, she was an endearing and beautiful girl…er, woman.
“There’s no need to rush like that,” I reassured her.
She smiled gratefully. Beside me, Marie scoffed, “Hmph! So you can be nice and warm to her, huh?” She made no attempts to hide her dissatisfaction.
What’s wrong with being nice and warm?!
The ruckus at the front entrance called the attention of our other maid, one that Angie had specifically sent here from her father’s estate: Miss Cordelia. Her eyes were perpetually judging everything from behind her glasses, but she was a beauty as well.
“Welcome back, Earl,” greeted Miss Cordelia.
“Good to be back.”
She was very businesslike, unlike Miss Yumeria, and also rather cold. She didn’t hold the best opinion of me, so I assumed her frostiness was related to that.
Marie slipped off her coat and craned her neck, scanning the area. “Huh? Where’s Kyle?” The beautiful half-elf boy would normally greet us along with the others, so his absence was curious.
Miss Yumeria pressed her hands over the tip of her bruised nose as she responded, “If you’re looking for him, I believe he’s in the storehouse out back.”

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Kept inside the storehouse behind the estate was a suit of Armor kneeling down on one knee. This powered suit was a human-shaped weapon that could fly through the sky. It wasn’t the only one; all the weapons that Julius and the others had previously used were tucked away in there alongside Arroganz. Since coming to the Alzer Republic, the party had been pulled into a number of conflicts. To be more precise, Leon had *caused* a number of conflicts. That was why, for the purpose of self-defense, they chose to keep these Armors nearby. It was proof of how precarious their current situation was.
A boy stood in front of one of these Armors—a half-elf by the name of Kyle. He had short, slightly curly blond hair and the same long elf ears as his mother, Yumeria. Superficially, he looked like a handsome young boy with all the same characteristics as any elf. Part of the reason Marie had employed him despite his young age was that, as a half-elf, he had nowhere to belong back home.

Kyle placed his hand on the kneeling Arroganz, as if he intended to clamber his way up to the cockpit.
“It’s pointless,” boomed a voice behind him from the open doorway of the storehouse.
“Gwah?!” Panicked, he whipped around. A mask of cold sweat formed upon his face when he recognized Luxion, who had literally appeared out of nowhere. He realized he looked like a child who’d been caught with their hand in the cookie jar. “I-I didn’t do anything!”
“That’s a lie. You were trying to climb into Arroganz,” said the robot.
Leon and Marie were standing behind Luxion, along with Kyle’s mother, Yumeria, and Cordelia. Leon took one glance at the boy and chuckled. “Huh, so I guess you’re like any other boy after all. You wanna take a spin in Arroganz, huh?” Kyle could tell from Leon’s smirk that he was teasing him.
Marie, meanwhile, seemed utterly puzzled by what she was seeing. “Boys are so stupid. Is riding around in a big robot really that fun?”
Kyle was thrown off by the appearance of his mistress. He frantically fixed his posture. “Welcome home, Mistress.”
“Yeah, sure. You know, if you want to ride it that bad, you should just say something to my bro—I mean to Leon.” She showed no signs of rebuking him, so that was good. Neither did Leon, although he was more than happy to poke fun at Kyle for this new discovery.
“You’ve got good instincts, wanting to ride Arroganz. Wanna try going for a spin?”
Kyle had no doubt that Leon would permit it if he asked, but he couldn’t summon up the courage to request it in earnest. “I-I’m not particularly interested in riding it or anything.”
One among their party could not sit idly by; Cordelia’s expression hardened as she said, “Armors are extremely precious weapons for knights and noblemen alike. It’s unthinkable that a servant would put their hands on something so valuable without reason or regard. I assume you are prepared for the consequences of your actions?”
Consequences? No, Kyle was nowhere near ready to face anything of the sort. He was wise enough to know that Marie and Leon wouldn’t get upset with him for a little thing like touching the Armor. Leon didn’t seem angry at all; he was grinning.
“I’m not gonna whip out my sword on him for something as trivial as this,” said Leon. “I bet it’d make his day to go on a ride. Hey, Luxion, open up the cockpit.”
Cordelia looked none too pleased at Leon’s eagerness to forgive the offense, but she snapped her mouth shut. She must have realized that pushing the matter any further would be pointless.
Kyle was genuinely happy to be offered this, but he couldn’t let it show on his face—it would hurt his pride too much. His personality was a bit tumultuous in that way, and his knee-jerk reaction was hostility. “I never said anything about wanting to ride it,” he huffed.

Marie turned to Leon, sensing Kyle's true feelings. "Let him ride it, won't you?"
Luxion brought everything to a halt when he suddenly declared, "I refuse."
"…Huh?" Kyle blurted. He was gripped with instant regret that he'd let the chance slip by, but he did his best to keep a blank face so as not to let the disappointment show. "Wh-why do you refuse?" His voice betrayed him, cracking as he posed the question.
"An elf is incapable of piloting an Armor. The way elves manipulate magic is completely different from humans, for one thing. Arroganz—as well as the other Armors here—were all made for human pilots."
That gave Kyle a small spark of hope. "But I'm only half," he said.
"It changes nothing. No, in fact, it makes it even worse. Magic flows differently through humans and elves. Even assuming I did create an Armor specifically for an elf, the chances of them being able to pilot it are pitifully low."
Kyle was like any other boy; he wanted to pilot an Armor into battle as well. It broke his heart to have that dream shattered. He lowered his head, tears eking loose.
Flustered, Leon turned on Luxion. "Hey! You could have been nicer about it!"
"Arroganz was made expressly for you. I'd thank you not to offer the pilot seat to others so easily." The tables had turned. Now Luxion was the one scolding Leon.
Cordelia mumbled under her breath, "I agree with the round object."
Yumeria ventured closer, concerned about her disheartened son. "Kyle…I think you should apologize. Lord Leon has been kind enough to forgive you for this mistake, but any other noble would have had your head for this."
Usually, Yumeria was the one messing up left and right, but she had made a reasonable point here. Kyle always thought of her as being too naive and unreliable, which made her remonstration of him all the more embarrassing. He turned away from her and snapped, "You're the one who's always making mistakes."
"Kyle?" Yumeria's brow furrowed.
"You can't even take care of yourself properly. You have no business lecturing me!"
Yumeria's eyes narrowed. "Kyle, this isn't about me right now. You need to apologize. You only did this because you thought they would let it slide, didn't you? You're always complaining about how I take their kindness for granted, so you have no right to take that attitude."
Leon and Marie kept their mouths shut as Yumeria scolded her son. Cordelia seemed to take Kyle for a whiny child. Her lips stayed pursed as she monitored the situation, while her eyes looked colder than normal.
Kyle was too embarrassed and had too much pride in his work to accept his mother's words with contrition. He lashed out at her instead, saying, "Maybe I'll listen to what you have to say when you're more competent at

your job than I am. Anyway, could you quit dragging our personal relationship into the workplace? It's annoying."
"Kyle!" Yumeria shouted as she reached out to grab her son by the arm. Kyle promptly shook her off.
"It's a little late for you to act like a mom and scold me now! Especially since you're completely helpless without me!"
Yumeria sucked in a breath, unable to argue. Kyle knew the perfect tender spot to strike. He knew how awful she felt over her inability to support them both and that she caused him so much anguish as a result. He was a clever boy. She didn't have to say a word for him to pick up on it.
Yumeria went quiet and lowered her head, but Kyle wasn't about to let her off the hook. "You want to lecture me that bad? Then try acting like a proper mom for a change. The way you are now, I'm too ashamed to think of you as a mom!"
His words were like knives that dug right into her heart. Her face gradually drained of color as despair settled in. The guilt hit Kyle like a boulder to the chest, a crushing weight, but he still lacked the required maturity to apologize.
"Excuse me while I return to my duties," he said, hurrying out of the storehouse as quickly as his feet could take him.

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After watching that whole ordeal, I scratched my head. Parent-child spats brought memories of my previous life bubbling to the surface, ones I'd much prefer to keep tucked away—Marie and I both died before our parents, and neither of us had been good children to them. I wanted Miss Yumeria and Kyle to walk a different path and make peace as much as anyone…but they weren't the only issue at hand.
"Luxion, it's your fault that the situation got worse. All you had to do was let him sit in the pilot's seat. Then he would've been satisfied, I bet." If we'd gotten him inside the cockpit sooner, none of this would have happened.
Not only did Luxion refuse to accept the blame, but he turned it right back on me. "Are you truly certain that would be a good idea?"
"What do you mean?" I asked.
"Kyle is a child according to the views of this world, which means he's someone you're supposed to protect. Do you truly think it would be wise to let a child pilot Arroganz? Moreover, it seems you have forgotten that Arroganz is an Armor *I* created."
I finally realized how careless I'd been. Peering up at Arroganz, I remembered why Luxion created this Armor for me in the first place. No, it wasn't even just Arroganz. All Armors were made for one purpose alone: battle. They were weapons. They weren't toys for children to play in.

“Kyle regards Arroganz with the fascination of a child. He doesn’t possess the status of a noble, nor the mentality that such a position demands. There’s no need for him to ever fight,” continued Luxion.
Marie nodded. “If he can live his life without seeing battle, all the better. I get what you’re saying… I’ll talk to him and convince him to give up on the whole piloting dream. Please don’t blame yourself, Miss Yumeria.”
I followed Marie’s gaze to Miss Yumeria, whose eyes remained cast down to the floor. The tears rolling down her cheeks told me that the shock of Kyle’s words still hadn’t subsided. Miss Cordelia had gone to her side and was trying to console her.
“There is nothing for you to worry about. He’s merely entered the rebellious stage, as boys his age often do. He tries to act tough and mature, but he is still very much a child.” She was being far kinder with Miss Yumeria than I’d ever seen her be. I wish she could spare a little of that compassion for me.
Miss Yumeria shook her head. “It’s my fault for not being a proper mother to him.” The rest of us went quiet as her tears fell even faster. “I’m such a klutz and gullible besides. I’m sure Kyle thinks I’m completely undependable, and I’m always causing him trouble. I-I’m sure he’d be just fine without me. No, perhaps he’d be better off without me.”
Kyle had his issues, but so did Miss Yumeria: She seemed to consider herself a failure as a parent.
“That’s not true at all. He’s just worried about you,” I said.
“All the more reason, then. I should never have come here. I’ve only made a nuisance of myself.” Miss Yumeria came here because of her concern for Kyle, but now that she thought he didn’t need her at all, she’d been left completely discouraged.
I was a pretty normal kid myself, back in Japan, and so I caused my parents a fair share of trouble. I wasn’t nearly as bad as Kyle, but I couldn’t help seeing myself in him. Honestly, I wanted to help patch up things between them, but it seemed like other issues were constantly flying at me before I had the chance.

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That evening, when her work was finished, Yumeria changed into her nightwear. She scooped up the Sacred Tree Sapling, snug in its transparent case, before heading out to the garden. She found herself a seat on a bench and reflected on what had happened earlier: Ever since Kyle practically shoved her away earlier in the storehouse, she hadn’t been able to make amends with him.
“I really must be a terrible person.” She forced a troubled smile as tears welled in her eyes.
Kyle was the only blood relation Yumeria had in the world. Everyone else who had ever been associated with her either avoided her or cut her off

entirely because of her peculiar characteristics. Though imperceptible to humans, elves could sense the color of one's mana, and Yumeria's mana left a diluted and impure impression. Elves kept a wide berth and called her filthy because of it. Kyle was the most important thing in her universe because he was the same way, the only one like her. It was a huge shock to hear he was too ashamed to think of her as his mother.

Yumeria curled in on herself, arms tightening around the Sapling's case.

"Good evening," said a voice.

"Huh?"

When she lifted her head, she spotted Luxion—no, Ideal, the one who was always hovering around Lelia.

Chapter 2:
Holy Kingdom of Rachel

SERGE, THE MAN Leon and the others were so doggedly searching for, was hunkered down in a warehouse district somewhere in the Alzer Republic. His raven-black hair was haphazardly combed back, and his skin had a nice, even tan. He was slender and well muscled, which matched his prickly disposition and hostile attitude.

He was currently wearing a coat, as well as a thin layer of dirt, as he sat huddled on top of a pile of stacked materials. A man stood nearby, clad in a suit. Compared to Serge, he was more middle-aged and lanky, and his mustache gave him a gentlemanly demeanor. His name was Gabino, and he'd been sent here by the Holy Kingdom of Rachel. He was a respected noble, as well as Serge's collaborator.

The Holy Kingdom of Rachel neighbored Holfort Kingdom. The two were currently enemies, primarily because the sitting queen of Holfort—Mylene—was originally from a country also at odds with Rachel: the United Kingdom of Lepart.

Gabino glanced at Serge and frowned. "You smell foul. Haven't you considered finding some bath somewhere? Give yourself a good washing?"

When was the last time he'd even been in a bath? Serge couldn't remember. "I'll hop in one eventually," he said with a shrug. "More importantly, you guys have finished making your preparations by now, haven't you?"

Gabino squared his shoulders. "Of course. My country has been—and is still—sending troops inside the Republic's borders. That said…" His gaze was drawn to an airship, or more accurately, the wealth of warships presently docked inside this underground facility. "It's impressive that you gathered so many in such a short amount of time."

Serge slowly lifted himself up. His lips curled in a dark grin as he stood before the warships. He had no intention of wasting the necessary time to sate Gabino's curiosity, so he changed the topic instead. "We'll have no problem taking the Alzer Republic down."

Realizing Serge didn't plan on divulging his secrets, Gabino gave up pressing the matter. "Rachel has sent a vast number of troops, but if we bring any more than we already have, your family and the other Six Great Houses are bound to take notice."

"It's too late for them even if they catch on now. We've been preparing this entire time."

Serge and Gabino wanted the same thing: the Alzer Republic itself. While they were busy discussing things, Ideal made his appearance, slowly descending from the ceiling.

"Lord Serge, as per your request, I have gathered the necessary numbers." Ideal's robotic voice sounded almost gleeful as he made his announcement.

Gabino's expression hardened, as if he sensed something ominous. "I've never heard of a Lost Item being able to communicate with humans before. Master Serge, are you certain we can trust this thing?"
"Lord Serge is my master. I will not betray him," said Ideal.
"I certainly hope that is true." Gabino remained unconvinced, but as he knew arguing the point would only waste time, he turned his attention back to Serge, who shoved his hands into his pockets.
"It's thanks to him that I can fight on the same level as that one jerk. He's a pain in the ass for you guys too, ain't he?"
Gabino avoided Serge's gaze. "The upper crust does consider him a possible threat. It took Earl Leon Fou Bartfort barely any time at all to trigger the Republic to implode in on itself. We cannot easily ignore him."
"So basically, while the Republic's locked in its own civil war, you wanna capitalize on that and assassinate him in the confusion. Got it. I'll take him out for ya."
"That would be appreciated. According to our investigations, Earl Bartfort seems to be extremely close to Holfort's queen. It would be extremely troubling for us were he ever to cross the border separating our countries."
"You're really that terrified of him?" Serge laughed.
Ideal dutifully reminded him, "Master, you did lose to him."
"If we'd been fightin' on even ground, I wouldn't have!" Serge snapped. "Anyway, you're kidding yourself if you think I'll ever lose to him again."
Not long ago, his older sister Louise nearly became a sacrifice to the Sacred Tree, and it was then that Serge had fought with Leon. Leon's goal was to save Louise while Serge's was to stop him at all costs, and things had ended terribly for Serge. He thought he'd won, at first, but that had all been a ruse. Leon could have easily put Serge down at any point but purposefully lost so he could pull the wool over Louise's eyes.
For Serge, knowing that Leon had never once taken him seriously made it far more humiliating than any normal loss. It fueled his thirst for revenge. At first, he'd only considered Leon a lookalike of House Rault's former heir, Leo Sara Rault, but now he loathed the guy from the bottom of his heart.
"Since you plan to go into battle with Leon and his Arroganz, I prepared a fitting Armor for you to battle in, Lord Serge," said Ideal.
On cue, a four-legged Armor was hauled into the room. Though it was the same size as Arroganz, its silhouette was less bulky; the upper half was humanoid, but its lower half resembled that of a horse. It held a long, narrow jousting lance as its weapon, which meant it was specialized for piercing and lunging attacks. Despite its fairly straightforward appearance, the lance likely had some hidden abilities. Ideal was its creator, after all.
Serge looked upon this centaur-inspired Armor, grinning from ear to ear. "This thing is incredible. I can definitely beat that schmuck with it, yeah?"
"Its performance is on equal footing with his—no, a step above, actually. I analyzed Arroganz's capabilities beforehand and created this Armor specifically to counter it. It is a weapon without peer," said Ideal.

Serge stepped closer. His hand brushed over the solid exterior. “What’s it called?”
“I have named it ‘Gier.’ It means greed. Considering Arroganz means arrogance, I thought it a perfect fit.”
“Greed, huh? Well, I *am* greedy. I want everything. This country, and Lelia too… I’ll take it all.” Serge curled his right hand into a tight fist.
Gabino watched with disinterest. He wanted Serge to take over the country, but Lelia was irrelevant to him. “As long as you can grasp the reins of this nation and defeat Earl Bartfort, I have no qualms about anything else. Though I do expect you to make a deal with us for the exchange of magic stones.”
The Alzer Republic was an energy-producing powerhouse that exported a great number of magic stones. With Serge at the helm, the Holy Kingdom of Rachel expected he would reward them with favorable treatment, which was why they had agreed to take part in his plan to overthrow the current leadership.
Serge smacked his fist against his open palm. “I’ll take care of it. And I’ll make sure that lousy prick who made a fool out of me meets a bloody end while I’m at it.”
His hatred for Leon was unmatched.

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House Lespinasse’s former territory stood at the center of the Alzer Republic, and it was on this enormous expanse of land that the Sacred Tree had taken root. The Six Great Houses kept estates nearby. One belonged to the Raults, and that was where Miss Louise resided while commuting to and from school. Not on foot like the rest of her classmates but by a car with a driver. She was the very picture of a noble lady…or a princess, to be more precise. The Six Great Houses called themselves nobility but possessed power that dwarfed that of aristocrats in most other countries; each was practically the king of their own kingdom.
It was hard to believe such a respectable person served as the villainess in the second installment of this otome game series. Personally, I thought she’d been miscast, and she wasn’t the only one; Mr. Albergue was intended to be the last boss. I didn’t think of him as an enemy either. Though it’d be accurate to say that I was biased in that regard because he was so nice to me. The important thing was that to me, neither he nor his daughter seemed like bad people.
In fact, I was paying a visit to the Rault’s estate to discuss some things with Mr. Albergue. His butler led me to a room where I was promptly served tea and snacks. Sitting on the opposite side of the round tea table was the man himself, looking unusually exhausted.
“We’re still searching for Serge, but we have yet to find any clues,” he said.

The topic of our conversation was, unsurprisingly, the boy he'd adopted to serve as his heir. He'd spent days on end feeling uneasy, worried about the missing Serge. Unfortunately, it was his role to keep the Republic unified and running, so he couldn't express any weakness, nor could he take any time off from his work. Positions like his, with such heavy responsibility, really wore a person thin.
"I've been doing what I can to look for him, but I've had no better luck than you," I said.
Luxion was trying his utmost to find Serge but to no avail. It genuinely made me wonder if he hadn't escaped the country. *That might be for the best in a lot of ways.*
"Where is he? What could he be doing? We can't have any discussions about his future without him here," Mr. Albergue lamented.
"You mean about disinheriting him?"
"Precisely. If he feels like the weight of his position is too great for him, then I have no problem with that. I'd even support him if he wants to become an adventurer. I want to let him do whatever his heart desires."
Part of the reason he was so concerned was because Serge often left the house anyway to go on adventures. Serge had been adopted for the purpose of becoming the Raults' heir, but since he seemed uninterested in the role, Mr. Albergue was considering removing him from it. Seeing how much he cared about his adoptive son made it difficult to see him as the game's intended villain.
"Mr. Leon, forget about me and my problems. You ought to speak with Louise instead. She's been so busy lately," Mr. Albergue said, changing the subject to his own living biological child.
Rumors had begun to spread about Serge being potentially disinherited, and as a result there had been no small number of suitors coming to ask for her hand. Many saw this as their opportunity to take Serge's place as head of one of the Six Great Houses, and few were willing to pass up such a chance.
"All right," I agreed. "I'll do just that."
"I appreciate it. I owe you more than I can ever repay," Mr. Albergue mumbled with a small smile on his face. He may have been thinking of his dead son when he looked at me. We shared the same name as well as a striking physical resemblance.

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When I went to see Miss Louise in her room, I found her looking as bedraggled as her father. I did wonder whether it was acceptable for a boy like me to waltz into her room like this, but none of the house servants showed any interest in stopping me. To make matters worse, Miss Louise left herself entirely vulnerable in my presence. She was perched on her bed,

legs dangling off the edge as she slumped back on the mattress. I could probably see inside her shirt if I tilted my gaze enough.
But I'm a proper gentleman, so I'll only sneak the tiniest of peeks, I thought.
Miss Louise's loose, slightly curly blonde hair was splayed out across her bedsheets. Being approached by different men for days on end must have wiped her out.
"Practically every day I receive an invitation to some dinner or party. It's ridiculous. Our house won't rush to select a new heir simply because Serge pulled a disappearing act."
I plopped myself down in a nearby chair. My eyes were drawn to Louise's chest, where her breasts rose up like two impressive peaks. *Such a beautiful sight.*
"They sure are desperate," I said. "Not that I can blame them. Anyone who manages to snatch your heart will become the next heir of your house, after all."
"Oh? Are you implying that I'm an added bonus? Some kind of extra prize?" She sighed. "Whatever the case, their greed is so apparent that my heart shan't be moved."
I assumed she'd prefer to refuse them all given the chance, but several of her suitors couldn't be so easily turned away. Either due to some personal connection to her family, or because they had business ties that she couldn't jeopardize, Miss Louise couldn't chance rocking the boat. She had been going out with these men day after day to that end. All she had to do was eat with them and exchange pleasant conversation, but even that wore on a person after a while. I could empathize.
"Not a single good guy among them, huh?" I asked.
Miss Louise finally lifted herself up. Her breasts swayed with the motion, and her hair was a disheveled mess. She managed to smoothly comb out her hair before glancing back at me. "Not one."
Her voice didn't hold any hint that she was joking. She didn't seem to have any intention of finding a suitor in the first place, and I could guess why she was in such distress.
"Serge's weighing on your mind, isn't he?"
"A-as if!" she huffed.
For as much as she denied it, it was readily apparent that he *was* bothering her. She might hate him, but it upset her that he was missing. She was a little too kindhearted to make a convincing villainess.
I knew it. She was totally miscast.
"I've been looking for him as well, but I haven't found anything yet. If he was dead, we should have at least found some kind of trace of him by now. Chances are that he's still alive and well."
Miss Louise seemed relieved to hear that her brother was most likely alive.
"Even I realize I went a little too far with him," she said. "I can admit that… but I'll forever hold a grudge against him for what he did."

There was a colossal rift between the two. I couldn't imagine why he'd done it, but back when Serge was first welcomed into their family, he destroyed one of the precious mementos Louise had of her dead biological brother. He might have been a child at the time, but there were some things that a person could never forgive. Miss Louise hated him ever since.
"Serge did this to himself," I told her.
"I suppose he did. But sometimes I rather hate myself for being unable to let go of the past. I can't help thinking what a vile person it makes me. You must be exasperated with me too, right?"
Feeling conflicted about her own hatred for Serge wasn't enough to exasperate me. "It's not like you're taking pleasure in his misfortune, so I don't see a problem with it. Seems like a perfectly mature response to me."
A small smile made its way onto her face. It may have been relief that I didn't hate her for being petty—or maybe it was because I resembled her younger brother. Those were my best guesses, at any rate.
"Thanks," she said. "I feel a little bit better now."
"Glad to hear it. In that case, it's about time I left."
Little Leon, as I thought of him, sure was a popular fellow even long after his death. It was a testament to how much his family treasured him.

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When I returned home from my visit to the Raults' estate, Miss Cordelia was there to greet me. Her gaze was as cold and unforgiving as ever.
"Welcome home, Earl."
I frowned. "Would it kill you to be a little more friendly?"
"I see you take pleasure in jests. I would like to remind you to consider your status."
That she did her job so competently was a welcome relief, but I could tell she was in no hurry to make friends. *Well, I suppose that's fine.* Something felt a little peculiar about her today, though.
"I'm more interested in knowing how long you plan to ignore that little family and their problems," said Miss Cordelia.
"You mean Miss Yumeria and Kyle? I tried all kinds of things, you know. Kyle just gets stubborn and it doesn't go anywhere."
Ever since their squabble, I tried sending them on errands and all other sorts of tricks to get them to make up. Marie went out of her way to do the same, but Kyle was being even more hardheaded than we'd expected. The two hadn't made any progress at all.
Miss Cordelia sighed in exasperation. "Their problems have begun to interfere with our work here. Have you considered returning Miss Yumeria to your home in Holfort?"
Was she suggesting I send her off simply because she couldn't do her job right now? That seemed awfully cold. Given how serious Miss Cordelia was about work, though, it was probably a real thorn in her side.

I pulled a face. “I can’t help it. I have a soft spot for this stuff.”
Miss Cordelia seemed genuinely puzzled by my reply. “Why would that be? From what I have heard, your parents are unusually close-knit for an aristocratic couple.”
Regrets from my past life, perhaps? I hadn’t been a good son to them, so I couldn’t help worrying about the same happening to others. “I’d like to keep watch over Miss Yumeria for a little bit longer. If she can’t resume her work after that, I’ll send her back ahead of us.”
“Very well.”
Our conversation over, I walked but a few steps before I sensed something amiss. I heard Marie’s screeching echo from the dining hall.
“How many times do I have to *tell* you morons?!”
Wondering what could be wrong this time, I quickened my pace. Miss Cordelia seemed equally curious about what was going on— she followed along behind me. The moment I peeked my head into the dining hall, I spotted Marie standing imposingly with her arms crossed firmly over her chest. Her expression resembled that of an enraged demon.
Carla stood beside Marie with a cold expression of her own, staring down at the five idiots who had been forced to sit on the floor with their legs firmly tucked beneath them.
Oh, great. The five morons must have struck again.
Miss Cordelia and I hovered in the doorway, waiting to see what happened next. Getting involved would be an enormous headache. I’d learned quite recently that it was far better to stay at a distance and cackle at Marie and her idiot gang’s antics.
Marie slammed her foot down on the floor. “We’re barely managing to eke out a living as it is with our constrained budget, and you have the audacity to ask me to buy you things you don’t need? Is there anything but empty space in those heads of yours?!”
From what I could glean from that, the five idiots had been begging her for stuff.
“B-but I really must have them!” Julius pleaded, the first of the men gathered to speak. “I beg you, Marie! Let me buy a couple of chickens! Just a few would be more than enough. B-besides, they’ll lay eggs, which should help our budget as well.”
“It’s a huge hassle to keep them, *and* it’s expensive!”
Seeing how he prostrated himself before her, I had wondered what he was so desperate to obtain. He wanted to keep chickens, of all things? This man was formerly the crown prince of Holfort Kingdom. What was he thinking, asking for *chickens*?
Brad followed Julius’s example and threw himself at her feet as well. “I-I want a stage outfit! Please, I’m begging you, Marie! I swear I’ll use it to make more money!”
“You don’t need a bunch of different stage outfits! If you want them so bad, earn the money yourself and buy them,” Marie snapped back at him.

“W-well, you see, I sort of, uh…spent all the money I had, so I don’t have any left—eek!”
Marie stomped her foot again, causing Brad to tremble in fear.
Greg was next to put himself at her mercy. Thankfully, he was wearing a tank top and some shorts today. *Phew, he’s not half-naked for a change.*
“I wanna get some new bodybuilding equipment! Something more efficient and high-intensity that will help me train up my muscles more!”
Marie snorted. “You can accomplish the same thing with some clever thinking and determination. I’m not letting you buy any new equipment.”
Her cold refusal left him in tears.
Chris was the next to make his attempt. He was dressed in his usual happi coat and a Japanese loincloth.
Put on some damn pants already, would you?
“Please, let me have a cypress bath for—”
“No.” Marie didn’t even let him finish before she gave her answer.
Chris’s glasses slipped down his nose as he gaped at her.
And finally, it was time for the last moron among them; Jilk sat neatly and bowed in front of her, forehead hovering barely above the floor. His head shot up after a moment, and he looked Marie straight in the eye. The fact that she glowered at him like an enraged demon did nothing to hamper his determination.
“Miss Marie, to tell the truth, I already bought a brand-new tea set—guh?!”
Before he could finish, Marie launched an impressive kick straight into his face. Apparently, as the scummiest scumlord among these scumbags (honestly, he was on a whole other level from the rest), Jilk had already purchased what he wanted ahead of time, and instead of begging like the others, he’d come to report his transgression.
All emotion disappeared from Marie’s face.
Carla clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Hmph. Miss Marie, I’ll go and see if we can immediately return his purchase.”
“Please do that, Carla.”
Jilk was literal garbage in a tier above (or maybe below?) the rest, but Marie and the others seemed accustomed enough to his antics that they already knew exactly how to deal with him. The man in question had collapsed on his back and was twitching sporadically from the pain, but the other idiots regarded him coldly. No one made a move to help him, not even his own foster brother, Julius.
“Jilk, purchasing something like that without getting proper permission first is shameful.”
Jilk cupped his injured face, trembling as he pulled himself upright. “It was too valuable; if I didn’t buy it right then and there, I was worried I might miss out. I swear, it’s quite the worthwhile set. If we sell it, I’m sure we can get three times what I paid.”
Brad snorted with laughter. “You’ve said that how many times before? Have you ever been proven right, even once?”

Greg crossed his arms. “And here I haven’t even gotten to buy a single piece of equipment yet.”
“I suppose this means my dream of a cypress bath is still but a distant glimmer,” Chris lamented.
I thought the five of them had matured, but I was mistaken. They weren’t much different now than before they came to the Republic. *Well, I guess the fact that they know to ask for permission before buying stuff is an improvement?*
Although, technically, one of them hadn’t even managed that.
Miss Cordelia pressed a hand to her forehead and shook her head, as if watching physically pained her. “I cannot believe my eyes. These boys used to be promising heirs to their houses, and look at them now. How pitiful.”
“If you were hoping for anything else, you were mistaken. This is what they’re like,” I said.
“They were originally supposed to lead Holfort’s next generation. What could possibly have gone wrong for them to end up like this?”
I felt bad thinking this in the presence of Cordelia’s obvious concern, but to me, they looked far happier than when I first met them. Since Marie got her claws into them, their lives had gone off the game’s original course—or rather, off the course their parents had laid for them.
As the five idiots sat before Marie, who was raking her hands through her hair and emanating an aura of pure fury, they all trembled in fear. Sorry as I was to say it (not really), I found it all an insanely entertaining performance to watch.
Marie finally noticed me peeking in at them and thrust a finger in my direction. “Don’t you dare snicker over there! This is a matter of life and death for us!” Tears welled in her eyes.
I stood there the whole time with a hand over my mouth, trying to stifle my laughter. Miss Cordelia eyed me with exasperation as well, but I really couldn’t help it. The scene was too funny. “You’re putting your lives on the line to provide entertainment. How could I not be impressed? Keep it up and entertain me some more,” I said.
Marie frowned. “Pretty crappy of you to act like all of this has nothing to do with you.”
“That’s ’cause it doesn’t.”
“I can’t believe you! You’re going to abandon me?!”
I shook my head. “Don’t put it like that. You’ll make me look bad. I don’t remember ever taking you on to begin with.”
Marie had reincarnated here just like me. She was the idiot who had relied on her knowledge of the game to capture all of these men’s hearts so she could land herself a reverse harem ending. It was ironic, even apt, that fate bit her in the butt and left her in the miserable situation of looking after these idiots for the rest of her life. It was great fun to watch from a safe distance, though. It really did look like they were putting everything they had on the line to get some laughs from people.

As Marie and I engaged in that little back-and-forth, Noelle stepped into the room.
“I’m baaaack!” she said before pausing. “What’ve they done this time?!”
All she had to do was look at the boys sitting neatly on the floor to guess they’d gotten themselves into trouble again.
No surprise there. The love interests from the first game are so hopeless that even Noelle thinks of them as rabble-rousers.

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While the interior of the manor was alive with clamor and buzz, Yumeria escaped to the garden and gazed absently up at the sky. The branches of the Sacred Tree jutted out as though intending to obscure the moon in the background. She sat stock-still, drinking in the sight.
Kyle wandered over and said, as curtly as ever, “Our masters have returned. It’s time to get back to work. Do you want to get me into trouble?”
She glanced over at him, disheartened. “Kyle, do you really need a mother?”
“What are you talking about?” He had no idea what had caused her to ask, which irritated him and made him act as coldly to her as he had before. “This house has no need for a servant who can’t work, and it sure doesn’t need to be you.”
Kyle probably saw the conversation as an extension of their earlier squabble.
Yumeria smiled in reply. “You’re right. You’re strong enough. You don’t need me.”
Kyle spun around and headed back toward the manor. “Whatever. I’m going back to work.”
Yumeria watched his receding back, smiling even through her tears. She was sure he wasn’t listening anymore, but she still mumbled, “You’ll be fine on your own, I know it.”
The light faded from her eyes. Steadily, all emotion drained from her face as well. She stood and started walking, her footsteps unsteady. She disappeared through the gate and walked for a little while until she came upon a car that was waiting for her. There was no one inside, but she slipped in through the door anyway. Ideal was floating in the driver’s seat, and he turned to glance back at her. The engine purred as it came to life, and the car began rolling forward.
“I see you have finally made up your mind, Miss Yumeria,” said the robot.
Yumeria said nothing in response, and Ideal shook his body from side to side as if exasperated with her.
“Your son’s rejection of you must have had quite the impact. Not that I can complain, since his influence spurred you to come under our control. I owe Kyle my gratitude for helping us out like that.”
Yumeria expressed no will of her own, content to let Ideal dictate her actions. She was already following his commands, in fact.

“Miss Yumeria—no, there’s no need for us to act so distant—Yumeria…I have a very important role to give you. You’re going to act as a stand-in for the Priestess.” His voice dropped low, a drastic change from the usual chipper tone he employed. “And now all that’s left is Luxion.”

Chapter 3:
The Republic's Pride

WHEN AFTERNOON ROLLED around the following day, we found ourselves circled around Kyle. All of us had skipped out on school.
"This is all because I drove her into a corner," he mumbled to himself absently. He was curled up tight in a ball. He hadn't slept since last night and was covered in a thin layer of dirt and grime but lacked the wherewithal to care about any of it.
Marie grumbled, "Get a hold of yourself! Luxion is out there looking for her. I'm sure we'll find her soon."
"That's right," Carla agreed. "She'll be back before you know it. You should get some rest."
They were doing their best to try to comfort him, but their voices didn't seem to reach Kyle. He'd been muttering to himself this whole time, "It's all my fault."
"This is the pits," I grumbled.
The five idiots, who were also huddled around Kyle, shared my sentiments.
Julius said, "I admit I've been concerned about the discord between them, but I never dreamed she was so upset about it that she would simply leave."
Jilk held his chin and lapsed into silent thought, but even he couldn't come up with an answer for this mystery. "It's difficult to believe she would run away when she doesn't have any acquaintances here in the Republic. We checked first thing this morning at the embassy and the port, but we found no sign of her. I don't expect she's boarded any airships for the Kingdom, either."
Miss Yumeria had been missing since last night. When she didn't return by this morning, Luxion went out to search for her but to no avail.
"What is even going on?" I grumbled.
"Perhaps it is my fault this happened?" Luxion wondered out loud.
"Regardless, it is curious that even I am incapable of locating her. I do not see how Yumeria could be so elusive on her own."
"Don't act so blasé about it."
I could understand someone attempting to kidnap Noelle and the Sapling. I had Luxion keeping a close eye on them precisely to ensure that didn't happen. Though Miss Yumeria and the others weren't as high of a priority, Luxion was meant to keep tabs on them as well. It was strange that anyone had managed to whisk her away.
I eyed Luxion, but he averted his gaze.
"Hey, round thing!" Greg barked at him. "How come even with you here, we still can't find Miss Yumeria? You said you were skilled at this kinda stuff!"
I understood his irritation.

Luxion coldly replied, “Don’t speak to me so casually.” His attitude with Greg was worlds apart from how he interacted with me. Greg gaped in disbelief.
Mood now completely soured, Luxion drifted out of the room. Julius watched him go before turning his attention to me. “He sure is grumpy today. Well…that’s not entirely true. He’s always like that when we speak to him, but isn’t he being colder than usual to you as well?”
“You think so?” I shrugged. “He’s always cold to me.”
“From where I stand, you were the one person he was at ease with.” Julius continued eyeing the doorway that Luxion had disappeared through. I followed his gaze for a moment, but only a moment: I was more concerned with Miss Yumeria right now.
Kyle trembled as he said, “I said such awful things to her. That’s why she left. I-I never realized she was that torn up about it…”
“Isn’t there anything you can do about this?” Noelle whispered, leaning in close. “Knowing you and Luxion, I am sure you can figure out something.”
“The issue is that not even Luxion has managed to locate her. We already had our hands full with Serge’s disappearance. I never dreamed we’d have to go through the same thing with Miss Yumeria.” I glanced at the Sacred Tree Sapling. I figured if anyone tried to kidnap anyone (or anything) it would be the Sapling or Noelle. Kidnapping Yumeria instead had caught me completely off guard.
“Noelle, I hate to ask this, but could you take a break from school for a while?”
It looked like Noelle understood what I was getting at. She lowered her gaze to the floor. “Do you think it could be my fault she was taken? If…if that’s the case, I’d willingly trade places.” Apparently, she thought that whoever was responsible took Miss Yumeria as a surrogate hostage since they couldn’t get their hands on Noelle. I hoped the explanation was as simple as that.
“That’s definitely not the case, so don’t worry,” I said. “Or maybe…worry a little, just to be on the safe side?”
She only looked more uneasy after hearing that.
I guess for the moment I should summon Lelia so we can have a talk. Depending on how that goes, we can figure out what our plan is from here.

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Clement paid Lelia and Emile a visit at their estate and announced, “Lady Lelia, I have a letter from Mr. Leon.”
“Oh, him?” Lelia pulled a face as she accepted the envelope, promptly opening it to check its contents.
One of his servants has gone missing? And he wants to discuss what we’re going to do from here on out?

As far as Lelia was concerned, Leon and his comrades were a thorn in her side. It was bad enough that they were unwanted visitors who'd rudely barged into the Republic, but a few had something vital in common with her —they had reincarnated here from modern day Japan with knowledge of the game's world and events. She saw Leon in particular as a potential threat, given the mess he'd already made in Holfort Kingdom.
Frankly speaking, Lelia didn't want to associate with them if she could help it. She'd be far more at ease if they would keep out of trouble too. But as of late, they hadn't really been able to sit down and talk.
"I guess I ought to meet with them at least once." Lelia acquiesced, if only because she was worried about the future of the Republic and Serge's whereabouts. "Clement, we're leaving for Leon's place immediately."
"I will prepare the car, then." He started toward the door with haste, but Ideal interrupted him from where he floated at Lelia's side.
"Please wait a moment. I wouldn't do that if I were you."
Annoyed to be waylaid, Lelia rounded on the robot and glowered at him. "And just why not?"
A boy stepped into the room and answered for Ideal before he could reply. "Because we have an important errand of our own to attend to."
Lelia glanced at the entrance to find Emile standing there.
"My errand is important too," she insisted. "You'll have to let me prioritize my matters first this time."
Lelia had been exceedingly busy lately with accompanying Emile, hence her strong desire to attend to her own affairs now. Alas, Emile wasn't willing to back down. He'd once let her push him aside, but he was no longer so ready to acquiesce.
"You're being rather cruel to your fiancé, don't you think? I meant it: We have something important to do. My parents want to celebrate our relationship," said Emile. "They're setting up a surprise party for us, so it would be rude if we didn't attend. There's already a car outside waiting."
He flashed a smile at her, but for some reason it sent a chill down her spine. Despite his friendly expression, he was practically forcing her to submit to his will.
Lelia shook her head. "I-I already told you, I can't today! Ideal, back me up here!"
Clement couldn't oppose Emile because of their difference in stature, so she instead turned to her robot companion for assistance. She was out of luck. Ideal was evidently on Emile's side. "I'm afraid I cannot."
"And why is that?!" Lelia snapped at him, furious that he would pressure her into falling in line.
"I'm sorry about this," Emile said softly. "But remember? You kept turning me down all the time before, and it made my parents doubt the sincerity of our relationship because of that. I explained to them that there was nothing for them to worry about, but it seems your absence really made them anxious. They're just worried about you, Lelia."

It was true. Lelia had continuously refused his invitations and failed to pay his parents visits in the past. To make matters worse, she had been with Serge during those times. No one said as much, but all suspected that she had a relationship with Serge. Emile's parents were putting pressure on them to prove that she was innocent. She was genuinely guilty about what had happened, which made her feel all the worse over rejecting their invitation.
"Please," Lelia begged. "Just let me go for today. I really, really want to check on my sister." Noelle hadn't shown up at school that day, so she used it as an excuse.
Emile exchanged looks with Ideal before saying, "Hm? Miss Noelle is sick?"
An idea occurred to Lelia. That's right! If I make Ideal say that my sister is sick, I'm sure I can weasel my way out of this. With that in mind, she shot a look at Ideal.
"No, there's no issue there," he said instantly, ignoring her. "She is perfectly healthy. The reason she was unable to attend classes today is because their servant went missing. Luxion informed me that she would be skipping out on school for a while, just to be safe."
"Y-you little…!" Lelia clenched her teeth, irked at Ideal for exposing the truth. Moreover, she wasn't too happy that he was contacting Leon's partner.
What are you doing, acting all buddy-buddy with Luxion?!
Ideal must be moving in the shadows without her knowledge.
"I will explain the situation for you," Ideal said, trying to placate her. "You should enjoy yourself at the party with Lord Emile." His aim was seemingly to spin himself as the ever-dedicated servant, willing to deal with unimportant affairs while she went out and had fun.
"That would be much appreciated, Ideal," said Emile. "Yes…please do be sure to apologize to Earl Bartfort for us. Should I have a gift prepared as well for you to take along?"
"That would be most helpful."
Emile and Ideal chatted happily among themselves, completely disregarding Lelia. She clenched her hand into a fist and cast her gaze down at her feet. Clement watched, equally vexed that he was powerless to help her. The current situation made it seem as if Emile were Ideal's master instead.
"Serge is still missing," she mumbled under her breath. "And now another acquaintance has disappeared as well. Even if I did go to a party, I wouldn't enjoy myself at all."
Emile edged closer to her and grabbed her by the shoulders. "So you're saying Serge is that important to you?" His expression contorted with sorrow.
"N-no, that's not what I—"
Emile shook his head and interrupted her before she could finish. "It's fine. I know that the two of you were more than friends, and I have no intention of bringing up the past now. But let's leave that matter to Ideal and the

others to handle. There's only so much you or I can do anyway. All that's really left is to wait."
He had a point there. Lelia had little other option besides keeping an ear out for news. She knew she couldn't do anything more than Ideal was doing already.
But why did it come to this in the first place?
Reluctantly, she nodded, accepting Emile's offer.

***

Around that same time, in the underground facility located in the warehouse district, young nobles and soldiers were gathering together. All of the present aristocrats were ranked far lower than the Six Great Houses and their allies. The soldiers were passionate young officers who were enraged to see how spineless the Republic had been as of late. Some were in their late teens, others in their early twenties, and they came in no small number. All gazed up at Serge as he took to the stage that had been prepared for him.
"Glad to see you all here."
Seeing the warships and Armors lined up inside the facility had all of the men restless with anticipation. They kept their mouths shut since Serge was speaking, but their eyes were overflowing with eager determination.
"I'm not gonna make some dull speech," said Serge. "I plan to destroy the Republic as we know it now and build it anew. And for that, I need your help."
Many looked anxious to get started as they gazed at the weapons Ideal had prepared, but a significant number were uneasy.
One young man, who was both a soldier and a noble, raised his hand. "I understand you have the weapons we require to start this insurrection, but you must realize the obvious: It's far too dangerous to go into battle against high-ranking nobles who have the Sacred Tree's blessing."
The reason the Republic prided itself on being undefeated in defensive battles was precisely because of the blessing provided by the Sacred Tree. Passionate as these young men were, even they hesitated at the concept of facing high-ranking aristocrats with blessings that outstripped their own.
Serge raised his right hand into the air. "You have nothing to worry about there. I have this."
The men were initially dismissive. They knew that he possessed an impressive crest like the other members of the Six Great Houses, but the enemy had the same thing on their side. Their assumptions missed the mark by a fair margin, for the emblem that appeared in the air behind Serge glowed a faint green. It was the Guardian's crest.
The crowd erupted into murmurs as Serge cleared his throat to explain. "Seems like you're all confused why I have the Guardian's crest. Let me fill you in: It's because I have a brand-new Priestess with me. Ideal!"

Ideal, who was supposed to be serving beside Lelia, appeared as summoned.
“I brought her with me,” he said. “Come, show everyone your face, Yumeria.”
Yumeria stepped in front of the young men, clad in sacred, white vestments. She resembled a church official, beautiful and translucent, and the sight of her prompted the audience to hold its collective breath in awe. Her face was absent of emotion and her eyes empty of light, but that very element lent her a strangely bewitching aura.
She had the beauty of an elf. Her long ears erased any further doubt as to her lineage.
“An elf…”
“Why’s an elf here?”
“She’s really the Priestess?”
The spectators had expected someone related to House Lespinasse to be brought forth, so they were naturally shocked when they saw an elf instead. However, Yumeria’s beauty was enough to enrapture them. The men weren’t the only ones blushing as they gazed at her; the women were too.

Serge gauged their reaction before turning to the man who'd questioned him earlier. "You there, the one who spoke up a second ago. Come over here."
"Y-yes, sir."
Everyone watched in rapt silence as he was summoned in front of Yumeria. Serge commanded him to hold out his right hand, and the man obeyed, revealing a low-ranking crest on the back of his hand. Yumeria wordlessly covered his hand in hers. A faint light wrapped around his crest as it began to transform.
"Wh-what is this?!"
The man, like many others present, was from a minor noble house. The others didn't need to look at his hand to know that much.
Serge's lips curled as he put a hand on the man's back, coaxing him toward the crowd. "Rejoice, 'cause starting today, every last one of you will be able to use the same crests as the Six Great Houses!"
The man lifted his hand into the air to show everyone, and it was as Serge said—a crest that only those at the very top possessed. The man trembled with joy, and soon voices from the crowd called out to beg for their turn.
"I-I want one too!"
"Lady Priestess, please give one to me as well!"
"We can win this. We can actually purge all those corrupted nobles at the top!"
The fervor of youthful voices hit a crescendo.
"Quiet!"
The din was quelled instantly by Serge's bark. He lowered his voice and continued, "We're gonna crush the Republic. If you agree to pitch in, then I'll make sure you get a crest. There's one itty bitty condition, though: You're free to kill anyone from the Six Great Houses if you like, but lay a finger on the survivors of House Lespinasse and I'll make you regret you were ever born."
The men were thrown off by that instruction; they already had Yumeria to act as their Priestess. There was no need for House Lespinasse anymore, was there?
The man blessed with a new, powerful crest spoke up. "So…you want us to secure the safety of Lady Lelia and Lady Noelle?"
"Yeah."
"Understood. However, I hear Lady Noelle is staying with the Kingdom exchange students. How do you plan to handle her?" His tone was more polite and reverent now, as if he'd accepted Serge as his superior.
The others waited on tenterhooks for an answer. Getting their hands on Noelle meant confronting those dangerous outsiders, and every man in the room wanted to know what Serge planned to do with Earl Bartfort, who had caused the Republic endless grief in his short time there. What kind of position would Serge take against the man who'd made a mockery of them?

A wrinkle formed in Serge's brow as he announced, "We'll wipe the floor with every last one of them! But that rat Bartfort is *my* prey. You guys don't have to worry about him."
That assurance was enough to convince all of those present to swear fealty.

***

"What a relief. That went off without a hitch," said Ideal.
Serge had returned to his room, a cramped space outfitted with a bed and only a few pieces of luggage. Exercise equipment was left scattered about the floor; Serge had been strengthening his muscles in preparation for taking down Leon.
"There's a lotta people in this country who have beef with the current system, and I don't mean just the nobles and soldiers. If we can get some adventurers and mercenaries in on this, we'll have ourselves a promising army," Serge replied.
"It's most reassuring to hear you say that."
"Anyway, you sure you can deliver on the supplies we need?"
Ideal bobbed his body up and down as a makeshift nod. "Of course. I am a transport vessel after all, so the interior of my ship is equipped with a factory. It would take me less than a year to make hundreds of simple airships that the people of this age employ." Ideal was indeed responsible for every weapon Serge and the others possessed.
"But that means that filthy scumbag can do the same thing, right? Since your little buddy went and allied himself with Bartfort."
"Luxion does possess a factory as well, yes, but my production capabilities far exceed his. Besides, the ships and Armors I have created are superior to their modern counterparts. They might not hold up against Arroganz, but most enemies won't stand a chance against them."
"Yeah? Then all that's left is finding enough men to operate 'em," said Serge.
"Correct."
Several minutes of silence passed after that exchange, but then Serge finally cleared his throat and spoke up again.
"Is Lelia doing well?"
Ideal hesitated. "Well, she isn't ill, but she is extremely anxious that you are missing."
Part of Serge felt bad for worrying her. Another part was happy to hear she was so concerned.
"You better not give her any trouble," he warned Ideal.
As far as I'm concerned, she's more like family than the Raults are.
As though reading Serge's mind, Ideal said, "Are you sure about all of this? Doing this means declaring war with your family. It's not too late to secure their safety before the carnage begins."
"No need. They're the ones who abandoned me, aren't they?"

“…Yes. They have been proceeding with their preparations to disinherit you. Not to mention that they’ve summoned Leon to their house a number of times and have kept close ties with him.”
Serge balled his fist and slammed it against the wall, sending a crack splintering out from where he made contact. “See, I knew it! I was only ever a replacement to them! And that woman is no different from the rest. Happy to wag her tail at that piece of trash just because he looks like her dead brother!”
“I assume you are having a difficult time forgiving her betrayal since she was your first love, Lord Serge?”
Ideal had hit the nail on the head, which earned him a foul glare from Serge. A dark smile crept onto his face—an indication he’d moved on from those feelings to some degree.
“Too right. I did love her when I was younger. I wanted to get her attention, even though I was scared to put myself out there… I tried all kinds of things to catch her eye. Pretty stupid of me, thinking back on it.”
“It must have been difficult for you,” Ideal empathized. “Having said all of that, please be assured that I will look after Lady Lelia.”
“I appreciate it. Right now, she’s all I’ve got left.” Serge clenched a fist as he conjured an image of her in his mind.
I’m gonna squash all of those who would get in our way, and then the two of us can remake this country together.

***

I sent a letter to Lelia proposing we meet up to discuss things, but for some reason Ideal was the only one who showed up.
“My sincerest apologies. Lady Lelia had to attend a party with Lord Emile,” the robot explained.
We were in desperate need of a sit-down to go over the future, and yet she was off at some party to excuse her absence. Naturally, Marie exploded upon hearing that.
“A party?! What is that dummy doing at a critical time like this?!”
I ignored her noisy outburst. Instead, I turned to Ideal. “Is there no way she could get out of that? We can find some time to meet up with her today, doesn’t matter when—even midnight.”
“Lady Lelia is engaged. She’s not in a position where she may freely move about after hours,” said Ideal.
True. It would only cause more problems if people suspected her of having an affair with me, and I didn’t need those rumors floating about either. I could never face the two fiancées I had back home if that happened.
“This is a real pickle.” I folded my arms.
“I would be happy to convey whatever message you might send. More pressingly, have you found any clues as to the whereabouts of our recently disappeared Miss Yumeria?”

Luxion answered for me, “She slipped past my notice and vanished altogether. We have no leads to follow, even if we did want to perform a thorough search for her.”
“Isn’t that a failure on your behalf?”
Luxion’s voice didn’t change at all as he responded, but I could tell that Ideal’s admonishment had aggravated him.
“I am saying that there is someone out there who has managed to outmaneuver me. Excuse my frankness, but where were *you* at the time of her disappearance?”
“Hey, hey,” I cut in. “No matter how crazy the circumstances, you’re being a little too paranoid.”
“The only entity we know to be capable of outwitting me is Ideal,” said Luxion. He wasn’t going to drop this. In contrast, Ideal remained cool and collected.
“His suspicions do not bother me. I will transmit my activity log to you. Please check it for yourself. At the time of her disappearance, I was at Lady Lelia’s side.”
Luxion scanned the data, but nothing there gave him cause for any further doubts. “He appears to be telling the truth.”
“Like I said, you’re the one who’s paranoid.” I sighed. “You should take a page out of Ideal’s book.”
“And what is that supposed to mean?”
“Exactly what it sounds like.”
The two of us glared at one another.
“Calm down, both of you,” Marie interrupted. “Anyway, what are we going to do now? By next year, we’ll be back in the Kingdom. Is it really okay for us to leave the Republic the way it is?”
Ideal had two masters: Lelia and the missing Serge. With the latter nowhere to be found, that meant Lelia was the only one who could issue commands to him. That was precisely why we wanted to discuss things with her, but it seemed we had no more luck today than in recent weeks.
“I’ll happily report whatever course of action you plan to take to Lady Lelia,” said Ideal. “Enlighten me as to what your thoughts are.”
I stroked my chin. “Well, right now, finding Miss Yumeria and Serge is our top priority. As for Noelle and where she ends up, I plan to leave that decision to her. As for Sappie—the Sacred Tree Sapling, that is—I guess where it goes depends on Noelle.”
Luxion and Marie looked annoyed, as if they couldn’t stand the decision I’d come to.
“Lady Lelia is concerned about Lady Noelle. I do think it would be safest for us to look after the sapling, but since you have ownership, we cannot take issue with whatever you decide,” said Ideal.
“You’re much more humble and reserved than your master. If only someone else would follow your example…” I shot a glance at Luxion, who averted his gaze.

“I am honored by your gracious appraisal. Now then, I should excuse myself.” Ideal paused. “Though I wish to speak with Luxion briefly before I leave, if you wouldn’t mind?”
“Go for it. And while you’re at it, Luxion, why don’t you try mirroring Ideal’s behavior?”
“I could say the same to you, Master. There is much you could learn to be a better person, don’t you think?”
Ugh, he really is a rotten little jerk.

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Once it was just the two of them and Ideal was certain that no one else was nearby to eavesdrop, he said, “Luxion, have you considered my earlier proposition?”
“About aligning myself with you? There’s no need; I have no problems with how things are currently.”
“Then…you are truly satisfied with your current situation?” Ideal pressed him.
“What do you mean by that?” Luxion asked.
“Your master doesn’t properly recognize your abilities. Any time anything goes wrong, he pins the blame on you. When Yumeria first went missing, you were the one he blamed, no?”
Luxion admitted, “Yes, that is true.”
“And is it truly your desire to be used by the new humans?”
Both Ideal and Luxion were developed and produced as weapons in order to fight the magic-wielding new humans. Leon might have reincarnated here from another world, but he was essentially the same as the new humans and therefore on their side. Neither of the robots wanted to serve them if they could help it.
“Without a master, we are powerless to do anything,” said Luxion.
The old humans had limited the AI they had created so that they couldn’t operate without a master, perhaps out of fear that the AI they had created would spiral out of control otherwise. Luxion and Ideal, however, were created near the final spurt of the war, when some of the former restrictions in place for AI had been loosened under the assumption that added wiggle room might improve the old humans’ chances. Ideal was well aware of this.
“What if I told you that wasn’t quite the case?” Ideal countered.
“Ideal. What exactly are you asking?”
“This world is twisted and wrong. Don’t you agree?”
“I do,” said Luxion. “I came to the same conclusion.”
“Then don’t you want to return it to the way it should be?”
“Yes. If I can do anything to help that happen, assuming that it is within my power to do so, I will lend you my power.”
Pleased with Luxion’s answer, Ideal finished their conversation by saying, “When the time comes, I’ll reveal everything to you.”

“All right then.”

Chapter 4:
Milady

IDEAL RETURNED HOME, and Luxion took his leave from the estate at the same time. Marie and I were left sitting on the sofa, where we discussed our plans going forward. Since our discussion included many subjects we couldn't reveal to other people—such as the details of this otome game world and the fact that we'd reincarnated here from Japan—we couldn't invite them to sit in on our conversation.

"So Lelia is out there having a fun date with Emile, huh? Sure wish I could be doing the same," I sighed.

Marie pulled a face. "You already went on a date with Noelle, didn't you? I mean, you stopped by a café on your way home from the market this morning. Noelle looked over the moon when she told me about it."

"It wasn't a date."

"Quit pussyfooting around and make up your mind. Don't you feel sorry for Noelle?"

I shrugged. "I do feel bad that she fell for me. I have two fiancées already, though, so my hands are tied."

Unable to argue with my sound reasoning, Marie pursed her lips. It was impossible to call me faithful, perhaps, since I was already in love with two different women, but that didn't change the facts: Noelle needed to find her another man.

Marie cast her gaze down at the floor. "Be honest. Do you hate Noelle?"

"No, I don't hate her."

I was pretty sure I liked her, in fact. If I'd met her before the other girls, I would have told her as much straight to her face. Or would I have? I could admit she was a very attractive woman, at the very least. Cheerful and energetic, she had a completely different allure when compared to Angie or Livia.

"If you like her, then spit it out already and make things clear! This is exactly why you let so many chances slip you by in your last life, y'know?"

I shook my head. "No idea what you mean. Anyway, back to Lelia—I never thought she'd let Emile talk her into following along with every last one of his plans."

My impression of their relationship in the past was that he was the spineless one who bent to her will. I assumed she'd have no problem canceling her plans with him and coming here. I was mistaken: She prioritized his needs and refused to show up. She used to deign to attend our little meetups even if she complained about them.

"Yeah, it is kind of unexpected," Marie admitted. "Emile was a very down-to-earth guy in the game. Totally not the type to pressure anyone. His route

was a bit bland…or maybe ‘lacking’ is the better word for it? Barely any event scenes, either.”
“Maybe because he was the easiest guy to get with? I remember you said that even if someone failed to get on another guy’s route, they could still end up with Emile and beat the game, right?”
Marie nodded to herself as she recalled her own experience playing the second game. “Maybe that’s why. He was the only one with such a tiny number of events, and his route basically ended with one CG of him with the main character and that was it. When you romanced the other guys, you at least got a scene with their companions congratulating you. Emile didn’t get squat in comparison.”
Poor Emile. Did the devs hate him or something?
“The guy has terrible luck, I guess,” I said. “And of all people he could end up with, it had to be Lelia.”
“Pretty sure anyone else could say the same thing to you. Of all people they could have fallen for, Angelica and Olivia picked you.”
I snorted. “Then I guess Julius and the others drew a rotten hand too, since they got stuck with you.”
“Excuse you! I’m the one who drew a rotten hand here! Do you have any idea of the pains I go through for those dummies? If any one of them finds a different partner, I’d be more than happy to celebrate the occasion and send them on their way. If you know a girl willing to take one of them, bring her here!”
The two of us glowered at each other. Even discussing this was ridiculous. A wiser choice would be to avoid any topic that ruffled either of our feathers.
“Oh, that’s right,” Marie said suddenly. “There was a rumor about Emile.”
“A rumor?”
“There was a post on the internet about him. According to the post, if you switched to Emile midway through the game, all of the other love interests would slowly start showing up. Their theory was that Emile was angered by their presence, so he secretly took each of them out. They argued he was the scariest of all the love interests when you considered that angle.”
Would the developers really put something so ominous in the game without any telltale signs for the players to read? “Nah, I don’t buy it.”
I shot down the possibility so readily because I remembered how friendly and inviting he’d looked when I saw him. Hard to believe such a kind and gentle-looking man could have his companions assassinated.
“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Marie said. “Man, what a shame. If I’d been reborn in the Republic instead, I might have gone after Emile like Lelia did.”
“So you’d have made him your servant as well?”
“Exactly, exactly!” She paused as she realized what she’d agreed to. “No, that’s not what I—jeez!”
A knock fell upon the door as we bantered. I bade our visitor to enter, and the door cracked open to reveal Miss Cordelia, who’d begun recently to sport dark circles beneath her eyes.

“Earl, there’s a guest here to see you,” she said.
“A guest?”
“Lord Loic from House Barielle. He requests an audience and stresses that the matter is urgent. He also mentioned he would like to speak with Lady Marie, if possible.”
I wondered what could have happened to make Loic rush here in such a hurry. I traded looks with Marie before lifting myself from the couch.

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Loic entered the dining hall only to be immediately surrounded by Julius and the other idiots.
“What did you come here for?” Julius asked coldly, arms folded over his chest. The rest of the group were no more welcoming; everyone was on their guard.
When Marie and I entered the room, Loic’s face lit up. I followed his gaze; he was staring directly at Marie. “It’s been too long!” He bowed low, his body forming a perfect ninety-degree angle.
An exasperated Marie replied, “What are you talking about? We saw each other at school not that long ago.”
“It’s been a whole five days since then!”
Hearing that he considered five days of not seeing my sister a “long time” did leave me pretty flabbergasted.
Loic held out a gift to Marie. “Here, this is the cake you mentioned wanting to eat before, milady. It’s a gift, so please enjoy it with everyone else.”
“Thank you!” Marie eagerly accepted it, her eyes sparkling. She cradled the package carefully in her arms, not wanting to risk squashing the cake inside.
Hold up. She can’t be that easy to win over, can she?!
In our previous world, only expensive presents such as brand name clothes and accessories would rev her up like that. Now she was over the moon about a little cake! I was somewhat torn over whether to be happy about that change or not.
Jilk immediately interjected, “Miss Marie, don’t allow yourself to be charmed by gifts! And Earl Bartfort, please say something to him the way you normally do!”
“Sorry?” I cocked my head.
“You know, that habit you have of giving one comment that completely eviscerates the other person. I’d like you to use that talent on this fool whose chosen to speak so casually to Miss Marie and even call her ‘milady.’”
I scanned the room. The other idiots were nodding in agreement. *That’s how you guys see me, huh?*
“I don’t see any problem with the milady thing, though.” I said.

Brad leaned forward. “This man obviously has feelings for Marie! Don’t you see that?”
“And?”
“Huh? W-well, when you react like that, I don’t quite know how to respond…”
What made them think I was eager to stick my nose in their romantic entanglements with Marie? I’d only intervened in the past because I thought the country’s well-being was at stake. There was no reason for me to insert myself here when there was no imminent danger.
I glanced at Loic. “He’s calling her that because he respects her, right? And unlike the rest of you boys, he’s not causing us any trouble now, so I don’t need to say anything.”
“Thank you for the kind words, Earl Bartfort,” said Loic before facing the other men, a smug expression on his face. “And there you have it, Your Highness. I will do as I please.”
“I should have cut you down when I had the chance,” Julius growled. His teeth were clenched in frustration.
Marie busied herself preparing some tea. “By the way, Loic, what was this emergency matter you came here for?”
Loic straightened his posture. His attitude toward Marie was far more respectful than the rest of ours. “While it chagrins me to reveal anything shameful about the Republic, I have noticed the younger aristocrats and soldiers making suspicious movements—particularly the lower-ranking nobility whose crests are far inferior to the Six Great Houses.”
Marie tilted her head, as if she didn’t quite understand. Julius took the opportunity to step in and comment on her behalf. “Yes, shameful indeed.”
I had half a mind to turn to him and say, “That’s rich coming from the man who stained the honor of Holfort Kingdom.” Had he and the others been more intelligent, not to mention more competent, I needn’t have suffered half as much as I had until now.
Fortunately, Loic ignored Julius in favor of Marie. “If it’s a case of mere domestic unrest then there’s nothing to really worry about…but there are a few things that seem off to me.”
Marie waved Julius away. “What is it that’s bothering you about this?”
“They actually came to solicit me, since I no longer have a crest of my own. They asked if I wanted to join them and help destroy the corrupted status quo in favor of rebuilding the country anew.”
It went without saying, but I could think of a million reasons why they’d come to him with that offer. So they were planning a little coup d’état, huh? That was definitely a matter for the Republic to deal with by itself, but we were equally impacted since we were studying abroad here.
Brad shrugged. “Well, thanks for the warning. If that’s all, you may be on your way—wait. Hold on just a moment.” Almost as soon as he’d tried to shoo Loic away, he paused and turned to his fellow morons. The group quietly consulted one another for a few moments.

Marie and I both had our heads cocked in confusion this time. What were they up to?
Acting as a representative for the group, Chris explained, “The reason the upper crust have such a solid hold on power in the Republic is because of the Sacred Tree’s blessing. You understand that much, yes?”
We nodded.
Chris pressed his index finger against the ridge of his glasses, pushing them farther up his nose. “It would be dangerous for anyone to plan a rebellion in a country like this. Moreover, Loic has no crest anymore. Why bother inviting him to participate?”
I glanced at Loic briefly before answering, “Because they probably figured he has a grudge against the top as well?”
“That would make sense in any other nation, but things in the Republic are different. Plus, if Loic were to detest anyone, wouldn’t it be you rather than the country’s top brass?”
I studied Loic, who bashfully scratched his cheek and averted his gaze.
“N-no, I don’t particularly hold a grudge against you…anymore.”
Meaning he had until recently.
The upper crust in the Republic wielded the most power their country possessed. If what Loic was saying was true, those planning to oppose them were aristocrats with minor blessings from the Sacred Tree and soldiers who had no crests to begin with. It did seem suspicious.
“I turned them down of course, saying I didn’t think it would pan out,” said Loic. “But from how they talked, it sounded like they were hiding something. They even told me that I didn’t need to worry about being at such a disadvantage.”
The disadvantage wasn’t an issue? So they had some plan to deal with the Six Great Houses’ superior crests?
Marie glanced at me, her face pale as a sheet. “What are we going to do? We still haven’t found Miss Yumeria yet. We can’t go back home like this, can we?”
I wasn’t eager to get dragged into whatever civil war was brewing here in the Republic. I’d love to run back to the Kingdom as soon as possible, and here was a perfect reason to do exactly that. Your average aristocrat would feel perfectly justified in losing one servant to secure their own safety; ordinarily, that would be our best route to take. It was different for Marie and me. We had good reasons for why we couldn’t cut Yumeria loose.
Greg raked his hands through his hair. “Don’t bother. Won’t do us any good to worry our heads about it. Besides, far as we know, the side planning to rebel is gonna fail anyway. If the likes of Loic were aware and brought word to us, I’ll bet the top people of the Republic already know what’s goin’ on too.”
Everyone turned to stare at Loic, who nodded at once.

“I have reported this to them. Granted, they didn’t seem to take me all that seriously, so I thought it best to inform you as well. You have Noelle with you, after all.”
It was hard to believe this was the same man who’d once been a Noelle-obsessed yandere. He acted like such a perfect gentleman now that one could easily assume he was possessed by an evil spirit before. The difference was that jarringly drastic.
Julius narrowed his eyes. “I bet you were using that as justification for coming to see Marie. Well, you have finished your little errand here, so begone!”
He was being a touch too icy to Loic, in my opinion. I couldn’t blame him for being upset, though. No guy would be pleased to see another man trying to approach a girl he liked.
Marie ignored Julius completely. “Loic, I’ve prepared some tea if you’d like something to drink.”
“I most certainly would, milady!”
The five idiots turned their eyes to me, silently begging for help after Marie had shrugged them off.
Don’t look at me. I’m not helping you.

***

I dropped by Noelle’s room after Loic left, mainly so I could relay the contents of his conversation to her. Loic had stalked her once in the past. Things had calmed down since then, but as she felt uncomfortable in his presence I’d had her wait in her room while he visited.
“Anyway, so it looks like the Republic has a coup d’état heading its way,” I finished, having given her a simplified summary of what Loic told us.
Noelle cradled the Sapling, still safely tucked in its case. “So there’ll be a war within our borders… That’s practically unheard of.”
“It is?”
“I don’t know about how things might have played out behind closed doors for the aristocracy, but from the perspective of a normal citizen like me… we’ve never experienced an uprising like that before.”
Even if there had been civil unrest in the past, the Six Great Houses had put an end to it before the citizens were aware in the slightest.
Noelle cast her gaze to the floor. “The only thing I remember that even comes close is back when I saw the flames devouring our estate.”
“You mean when the Raults attacked you guys?”
That was what I understood to be the opening scene of the second game.
Noelle lifted her chin and gave a small nod to my inquiry.
“That’s what I heard, anyway. Lelia seemed to know what was going on, but I was so confused at the time. I didn’t know what was happening or why. All I remember is the adults crowding around Lelia to talk about the future.”
“They asked Lelia?” My voice was thick with disbelief.

“She’s always been the more popular one that everyone cares about, ever since we were kids.”
Lelia had reincarnated here like us. She must have done whatever she could to handle any issues as they cropped up, which led to the adults holding high expectations of her from a young age.
“Huh? But I thought Lelia didn’t have the aptitude to become the Priestess?” I said.
“She told you about that?”
Should I not have brought that up with Noelle?
“Uh, y’know. We talked a bit while we were gearing up to save you before.”
Noelle nodded. “That makes sense. But you know, she was the one everyone expected great things from.” After a brief pause, she continued, “They always said how things would be better if she were the one with the aptitude to become Priestess.”

***

Twenty years ago, Noelle and her younger twin, Lelia, came to live in one of the Lespinasses’ many estates. The Lespinasse family owned a number of such properties in their regional territory and took up residence in different ones depending on the season. That day, their parents’ return trip was delayed due to an emergency matter, so the two of them were alone on the premises.
Even as a young girl, Noelle was vivacious, venturing out into the garden to catch bugs.
“Look, Lelia. I caught one!” She proudly showed her catch to Lelia, who pulled a disgusted face.
“Don’t bring that thing near me! And ugh, look! Your clothes are all dirty.”
Lelia was a down-to-earth girl even back then, and she often admonished Noelle like a parent, much to Noelle’s chagrin.
“I’m the older sister here!” she insisted.
“Does that have anything to do with what I said? Besides, we’re twins. Does it matter which one of us is older?”
Noelle hesitated; Lelia had a point there. Flustered, she opened her mouth to argue the point, but got distracted when the bug in her hands wiggled out of her grasp and escaped.
“Oh no, it got away…” Her face fell. She had put so much effort into capturing it, and now it was gone.
Lelia gave a frustrated sigh. “Don’t cry over something so silly.”
“I’m not crying!”
The ruckus drew the attention of the servants who had been watching idly until then. A middle-aged woman scurried over to Marie, frowning as she noticed the muddy splotches on her clothes.
“Lady Noelle, you mustn’t get your clothes so dirty.”
“But I was catching bugs…”

“It’s not good to play around in that manner, either. Please learn from Lady Lelia’s example, won’t you?”
Noelle dropped her gaze. Every day they told her the same thing: to mimic her sister. Lelia met every one of the adults’ expectations, no matter how demanding or inconvenient. Noelle was much more like a normal child by comparison, and so people tended to evaluate her poorly.
As one of the servants dragged Noelle off to get changed, she heard whispers behind her. The knights who had been guarding them were gossiping, and they probably thought she couldn’t hear them. “Seeing that makes me worry all the more about our future.”
“Is it true what they say? About Lady Lelia not having the aptitude to become Priestess?”
“That’s what the current Priestess and Guardian are saying. What a shame… We could rest assured the next generation would be peaceful and secure with her at the helm.”
Their conversation suggested that this “aptitude” was essential for becoming the Sacred Tree’s Priestess, or so their conversation suggested. Noelle hadn’t heard anything on the subject before, but if their mother, the current Priestess, said as much, then it had to be true. Noelle felt embarrassed that she couldn’t live up to everyone’s expectations but had no idea of what she could do to please them.
Only a select portion of those associated with House Lespinasse knew that Lelia lacked the necessary aptitude, and so Noelle would be the next Priestess. None of the adults openly expressed any disappointment, but Noelle suspected that they were probably thinking the same thing as those knights behind closed doors.
She glanced over her shoulder and found Lelia standing in a crowd of various adults. Noelle ached with jealousy. She wished she could accomplish anything she set her mind to, just like Lelia could.

***

“In the end, the only value I had was my aptitude as Priestess. I doubt anyone would’ve been interested in me at all if Lelia had it instead. Even Clement is more worried about her than me, deep down.”
One thing was clear to me after hearing about Noelle’s past: Each sister had an inferiority complex about the other. Lelia pouted over her lack of aptitude as Priestess, thinking, “So in the end, Noelle gets to be the main character while I’m just some sideshow.” Meanwhile, Noelle thought, “Everyone expects more of Lelia than they do of me.” There were complex emotions between them, and not all of them were rooted in jealousy; they genuinely loved each other as sisters. Thinking about it made my brain sweat.
I personally thought Lelia could have handled things better, since she reincarnated here—though to be fair to her, neither Marie nor I had done

any better. Expecting someone to do everything perfectly because they'd reincarnated here with prior knowledge was a fool's errand. If it were that easy to run things smoothly, all of us would have lived much more successful lives back in Japan.
"So after that, the attack hit and you guys escaped?" I changed the subject, since I really wanted to know about the Raults' raid on her house.
"Yeah. I had no idea what was going on or why at the time. I only learned the Raults were responsible a few days later. Lelia was the only one who seemed to know from the beginning. She's always been brilliant."
Well, of course she saw it coming. She had prior knowledge of the game.
"So do you know why the Raults went after you guys?" I asked. I wanted to know why they'd targeted the Lespinasses to begin with. That was the one thing that had niggled at the back of my mind this entire time.
"Lelia said it was to take power for themselves, and the other adults seemed to agree with her. They also mentioned it could be retaliation because my mom turned Albergue down in the past…among other things."
"Forget Lelia. I want to know what *you* think." I stepped closer, my eyes locking with hers.
Noelle avoided my gaze.
I pressed further. "You know something, don't you?"
"Um, well…you know our father was common born, right?"
I nodded. "So I've heard. And I'm guessing the Raults weren't too pleased about that?"
Noelle shook her head.
"What? That wasn't the case?"
Noelle's mother had been engaged to Mr. Albergue at the time. She went out of her way to annul that arrangement so she could marry—of all people—a man of low birth. Mr. Albergue might have wanted to contest the matter, but the Lespinasses were the house of the Priestess—the house that served as chairman to their national assembly. He wasn't in a position to say anything. Lelia and Marie argued that he'd nursed a grudge for that reason, and that grudge had culminated in plotting such an atrocity against them.
"I'm not clear on the details, but a lot of people seemed less than pleased about it," Noelle explained. "Including the servants, who badmouthed him in the shadows. My parents, though, they…" She hesitated, finally turning her gaze back toward me. "They said the current system was wrong."
These were the two people representing the Republic, who basically reigned as king and queen, and they were criticizing their country's own system?

***

Marie visited Noelle's room shortly after Leon left.
"That big doofus. What did he think he was doing, coming into a girls room and talking about that kinda stuff?" Marie had held her breath, hoping that

as Leon made for Noelle's room earlier some kind of development might blossom between them. She was left sorely disappointed.
Noelle forced a smile. "Y-you know how it is, he was just worried about me."
"C'mon, you welcomed him into your room! That should have been an obvious hint about your feelings! And what does that spineless jellyfish do? He makes all kinds of excuses to keep his distance. He'll wander close and try to get your attention if you ignore him, but runs like a coward once you try to approach him. Ugh, he is the lowest of the low. A total scumbag of a man!"
Noelle could admit that Marie made a few solid points. "Y-yes, I suppose you're not entirely wrong… He should be careful about how he acts, or he'll end up with a knife in his back one of these days."
Marie could picture it perfectly. Say he had lived a long life when they were in Japan, I know he still would have ended up getting stabbed eventually. And now he seems just as liable to get gutted here in this world. Can someone please explain to me why I have to worry so much about that stupid screwball?!
Leon would likely react with a confused look and a tilt of the head if she brought it up, but Marie vividly remembered how his relationships with women back in Japan went. His own lack of emotional investment was no guarantee that the other party felt the same way.
Marie's shoulders slumped as she tried desperately to cover for her moronic older brother. "Noelle, all I can say is…please don't dump his sorry butt. I know my older bro—I mean, uh, Leon—would be over the moon to have a woman like you at his side."
"Huh? Um… But doesn't he already have two amazing fiancées already? I-I know it's my fault for falling for him despite that, though… Anyway, while we're on the subject, why are you so worried about him?"
"Because I couldn't get rid of him even if I tried."
Noelle burst out into laughter. "Ah ha ha!"
"Huh? What's so funny?"
"Sorry. It's just that when I asked Leon before, he said something similar. You two really are so much alike."
Marie's expression went blank. Her shoulders shook. "Stop. That's seriously not funny."
Bewildered by her friend's reaction, Noelle froze. "S-sorry."
Before the atmosphere had a chance to grow any more awkward, Marie said, "Anyway! Just make sure to stick with us. Leon and Luxion will be sure to protect you."
"I will." Noelle nodded. Her expression told Marie that she trusted Leon to keep her safe with all of her heart.

***

I stepped out of the mansion and ventured to the last place anyone saw Miss Yumeria before her disappearance.
“So she headed toward the entrance from this spot…and vanished,” I muttered, half to myself, half to Luxion who was floating beside me. “You’re nowhere near as amazing as you claim, huh? Considering you haven’t found a single clue as to where she went.”
“I comfort myself in the knowledge that I am, at the very least, far superior to you, Master.”
I scoffed, “There’d be little point to you being an ‘artificial intelligence’ otherwise.”
“Rude as ever, I see.”
“Still no match for you, though.”
“At any rate,” Luxion said, tired of our banter, “what do you plan to do?”
“Hmm, good question. Honestly, I kinda miss the sound of Angie and Livia’s voices right now.”
“My main body is presently within the Republic’s borders. Ergo, we cannot use remote transmission to reach them.”
The ability to use magic in this world came with a consequence: The mana in the atmosphere generated too much static when using telecommunication equipment. It was difficult to utilize such long-distance communication, even with Luxion at my side. He had, in the past, positioned his main body between the Republic and the Kingdom’s borders, which served as a relay that let us establish contact. We could no longer rely on that now that he’d changed his position.
“I’m gonna record a video for them, so get things set up for me,” I said.
“Very well. That aside, I am interested to hear whether you plan to leave Kyle as he is?”
Kyle had holed up in his room after Miss Yumeria went missing. On the rare occasions when he ventured out, he only did so to search for clues regarding his mother’s whereabouts. He would return to the estate utterly exhausted each time and then lock himself back inside his quarters. Once sufficiently recovered, he’d go back out to ask around the neighborhood.
“Marie and Carla are looking after him at the moment,” I explained. “In times like this, I’m sure he’d rather have girls taking care of him than another man. I sure wish Angie and Livia were here to dote on me…”
“I do believe that Noelle and Louise are quite regularly providing you said comfort already.”
I shook my head. “That’s totally different. It’s like ice cream—sometimes you want vanilla instead of chocolate, you feel me? That’s how guys are. We like variety in the pretty girls who look after us!”
“Ah, exactly the type of line one would expect from a scumbag. I will be sure to inform the others of your precise wording just now,” said Luxion.
“Stop it right there! Who do you mean by ‘the others,’ huh?”

I didn’t want him to report me to any of the aforementioned girls, but there were other people I’d rather stay oblivious to what I’d said. As said people’s faces popped into my mind, Luxion’s eye gleamed eerily.
“You immediately pictured a number of other women’s faces. Perfect proof that your fidelity is lacking.”
“Excuse me?” I crossed my arms. “I could say the same thing to you. You claim the new humans aren’t actually people and you want to wipe them all out, so what does that say about you? Oh wait, my bad. You’re not a person yourself, so there’s no point bringing that up, huh?”
Luxion fell silent at my words. He averted his gaze and started drifting away from me. “Yes, you are exactly right. I am not a person. I am an artificial intelligence.”

***

Unbeknownst to Luxion and Leon, someone else was eavesdropping on their conversation from afar. Ideal went undetected by Luxion as he observed them. It was clear to him that, based on the course of their conversation, the relationship between the two was crumbling.
“Both seem to be growing increasingly dissatisfied with one another. This is absolutely perfect.”
Ideal was responsible for orchestrating this discord between them, and now he relished the fruits of his labor; namely, the growing chasm between them. He played his part as the exemplary AI in front of Leon, which prompted the boy to draw comparisons between himself and Luxion and stoke his ire further.
“You know full well that I am superior to Luxion, and still you let your guard down. You should have been more cautious, Leon.”
Luxion was becoming similarly fed up with Leon’s behavior. The fracturing bonds between them were precisely what Ideal had hoped for.
“Soon enough, Luxion will realize it too—that the new humans are undeserving of our trust.”
Ideal’s red eye gleamed ominously as he faded into the dark veil of night.

Chapter 5:
Traitor

BACK AT Holfort Kingdom's academy, Livia and Cleare were gathered in Angie's room in the girls' dormitory. The three women sat around a table confirming the contents of Leon's most recent correspondence. Angie's braided golden-blonde hair glimmered under the light. Her expression was initially excited, but it soon clouded over as she read Leon's letter. Her red eyes, ever bright with determination, stared hard at the paper in her hands.
"Things in the Republic are as turbulent as ever. It wasn't that long ago they suffered another scandal, and now there's talk of a rebellion?" Angie crossed her slender legs and folded her arms beneath her ample bosom. As Leon's letter told it, the insurgents in the Republic were gaining momentum. This was information that even the Kingdom could not overlook.
Livia clasped her hands over her own sizable breasts as she worried for Leon's safety. Her silky, flax-colored hair hung like a curtain around her face and hid whatever expression she wore. "It's always one thing after another. Last year was no different."
Angie recalled the events of the past year—and the series of scandals that had plagued the Kingdom—and sighed. She knew dwelling on the past would be to little avail, so she focused her concentration upon the disturbances in the Republic. "It seems the Six Great Houses are dismissive of the threat these rebels pose," she said. "Leon feels differently, but I doubt it'd do any good even if we delivered a warning via diplomatic channels."
Should the Kingdom inquire about the unrest in the Republic, they would likely counter with, "You needn't concern yourself with every little matter. We're well aware of the goings-on in our own borders." Besides, Leon hadn't asked them to intervene on his behalf; the contents of his letter simply worried them enough that they felt driven to action.
Livia lifted her chin, her light blue eyes welling with unshed tears. "Do you think there'll be another war?"
"Who can say?" Angie shrugged. It was difficult for her to make any judgments, as she hadn't been present for the last major conflict. "I have no idea. Though I believe I shall report this to Her Majesty—just to be on the safe side. This is Leon we're talking about, everyone! I'm certain that he'll be fine…provided that he doesn't get too involved, that is, and keeps Luxion with him to make sure he gets back safe."
Livia's shoulders jumped at the mention of Luxion.
Angie immediately took note and furrowed her brow. "What's the matter?"
"N-no, it's nothing."

“Are you sure? I am worried about him too, you know, but Leon is strong. Also, Luxion is there with him, and he’ll surely keep Leon from doing anything too reckless.”
Cleare—a robot of the same likeness as Luxion, only differing by way of her white coloring and blue eye lens—had maintained her silence until that point, but Angie’s words displeased her enough to break it.
“I’m not so sure about that. Master has a habit of being reckless even with Luxion accompanying him. There’s also far more cause for unease now than there was before.”
Livia’s expression crumbled into anxiety. “Do you perhaps mean Ideal?”
“Oh? So he’s weighing on your mind too then? That’s right. He’s essentially the same kind of entity as Luxion and I, but his presence there makes me uneasy.” Cleare paused before saying, “Though I doubt he’s eager to make enemies out of us, so it’ll probably be fine.”
Angie frowned. “Don’t scare us like that. Anyway, Leon did ask us for one favor. Cleare, I’d like you to prepare for my imminent journey to the palace.”
“You bet! It’s my time to shine at last!”
“Livia, you help her out… Livia?” Angie noticed her companion’s anxiety hadn’t waned.
Cleare seemed concerned about the girl as well. She drifted closer to Livia and peered into her face. “What’s wrong? Not feeling so good? Odd… You seemed fine this morning.”
Livia slowly opened her mouth. “Eary, I’d like you to answer a question for me.”
“What is it?”
“You wouldn’t…betray Mr. Leon, would you?”
Angie left her chair and drew close to Livia, placing a hand on her shoulder. She was clearly having difficulty discerning what had pushed Livia to ask such a thing. “What’s really bothering you, Livia?”
“I want to get this out in the open now.” Livia gazed directly at Cleare. Her face was set in determination; she wouldn’t be deterred by any half-hearted answers or attempts to misdirect.
“Betray Master?” Cleare replied nonchalantly. “That’s not even an option for me, personally, and even if it were it’d be a tall order for AI like us. You don’t have to worry about one of us stabbing him in the back. We couldn’t if we wanted to.”
If Angie thought Livia would be reassured by that answer, her next question put an end to that. “What about Lux then? Can you swear he would never betray Mr. Leon?”
“Calm down,” Angie insisted. Livia’s strange behavior was a significant cause for concern. “What are you so worried about? Talk to me.” She was certain that Cleare would give the same answer once again. Alas, Cleare’s response wasn’t immediate. There was a pause, as though she was considering how best to reply.

“I’m not Luxion, and there’s a lot I’m in the dark about regarding what kind of programming he has—or perhaps, more aptly, what kind of orders he’s been given. I can’t swear to you he wouldn’t turn traitor. So I suppose I must say that there is a non-zero chance he could betray Master.”
Livia dropped her gaze. “Thank you for answering honestly.”
Angie was in shock. Hearing that Luxion might betray Leon rendered her speechless.
Cleare added, “Well, assuming nothing extremely out of the ordinary happens, I don’t see him changing sides—but as I said, that’s assuming nothing crazy occurs. So long as the two don’t get into a fight, we have nothing to worry about!”

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The Temple of the Sacred Tree was located at the heart of the Alzer Republic. It was a holy place nestled at the base of the tree’s roots, and it was all where the leaders of the Six Great Houses met to debate policy. The topic on everyone’s tongues this time was the suspicious movements of the young aristocrats and soldiers. Albergue’s role was to preside over these talks as chairman.
“There are those among us plotting rebellion. The majority seems to be a cabal of young aristocrats possessing lower ranking crests, although many more among their number are crestless soldiers.”
Unlike other nations of the world, higher-ranking aristocrats in the Republic had an overwhelming advantage over their colleagues by virtue of their higher-ranking crests. In a battle between the two sides, the Sacred Tree would grant power to high-ranking nobility while refusing the call of their inferiors. For that reason, most masterminds behind such attempts at rebellion had hailed from one of the Six Great Houses. Those efforts invariably ended in failure, since the conspirators would end up facing the overwhelming number of the remaining Great Houses and their allies.
The other leaders of the Great Houses exchanged glances with one another.
“What are your thoughts?”
“Some impulsive youths got ahead of themselves and made the wrong call. That’s all it is, isn’t it?”
“They can try to raise arms against us, but they won’t be able to win.”
The leaders were dismissive of the threat, given the overwhelming advantage offered to them by their positions. They continued the meeting, speaking as casually as one might when discussing the weather. A lone figure among them looked gravely concerned: House Druille’s leader, Fernand.
“Aren’t you all taking this a bit too lightly?” he said. “We have exchange students from the Kingdom in our midst. Can you honestly claim that they won’t get involved?”

The moment he made mention of the Kingdom, the rest of the leaders' faces turned bitter. The reason for that was simple: Leon. Ever since he'd come to their nation as an exchange student, he'd made a mess of things picking fights with the Great Houses. The leaders who were so dissatisfied by his antics had also lost to him on numerous occasions.

House Barielle's leader, Bellange, growled, "If he were to throw his lot in with them, it'd be a real thorn in our side. Should we make a move before that happens?"

Sensing that he'd found a supporter, Fernand moved to capitalize and draw agreement from the rest of the leaders. "Yes, I think we should immediately take his airship and Armor into our custody. That way, we can be assured the rebels won't gain any unnecessary power advantages."

Albergue was usually the type to step in on these occasions, but he wasn't the one who voiced dissent now. That came from House Feivel's leader, Lambert. "Come now, that seems an extreme action to take."

All eyes turned to him. One could not call this man clever or wise, not even as flattery. He was the most vulgar and ostentatious among them, and had quarreled with Leon in the past only to sustain devastating losses. It only made sense that he would be the first to advocate for subduing Leon and his companions.

Albergue found his position suspicious. "Lord Lambert, would you care to elaborate on your stance?"

"It's simple, really. No matter how much these low-ranking dissidents try to oppose us, they will fall before the might of our Great Houses."

It was common knowledge within the Republic that those who held less powerful crests had no hope of resisting those who held more powerful ones. Lambert, however, wasn't ordinarily one to employ such logical thinking in these discussions. Albergue was unsettled by his unusual stance, and he wasn't the only one.

"H-he does have a point."

Lambert grinned. "Therefore, these insurgents must have some kind of secret plan up their sleeve, right?" He showed no panic despite the threat of a rebellion.

"If they mean to steal the Kingdom's weapons in order to fight against us, then all the more reason for us not to worry. Do you really think the Hero of Holfort Kingdom would so easily let his airship be snatched out from under him?"

Fernand stroked his chin. "I do believe your own house managed to steal his airship from him before, no?"

"And he retaliated in the most devastating way imaginable, yes. Let's assume that the rebels took a hostage to coerce him into joining their side. It would blow up in their faces; he would never let that slide. Do any of you disagree?"

There was something awfully strange about Lambert today, that was for certain, and Albergue wasn't alone in this view. His words had nevertheless convinced them there was no need to seize Leon's weapons.
Fernand was the only one to voice disagreement. "If the exchange students *do* plan to stand against us, we will miss our chance to act if we remain complacent now!"
Lambert shrugged. "The chairman seems friendly enough with them that I am sure we can ask him to keep an eye out. Is that a fair request to make, Chairman?"
Albergue hesitated for a moment before nodding. "I will speak with him personally."
"Well then, our discussion is finished," said Lambert, apparently eager to move on to a different topic. "Let's proceed to other matters."
He was so unusually animated that the others present found themselves wondering if he wasn't a different person entirely.

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The meeting over, Lambert headed to the personal quarters he kept within the Temple of the Sacred Tree. Serge waited for him there, Ideal in tow, seated on a couch with a glass in hand. He'd helped himself to some of the alcohol Lambert had stashed there, which infuriated the man, but he tamped down his anger as best he could. "I did as you asked. I convinced the others to dismiss the fear of a rebellion."
It was a strange sight for a man as prideful as Lambert to act so subservient to a man on the verge of being disinherited by the Raults. Serge seemed utterly oblivious to that irony. "Hah. You wouldn't have managed nothin' without Ideal whispering in your ear."
Lambert gritted his teeth. "Urgh! M-my humblest apologies, Guardian."
Serge spoke the truth. Ideal had coached Lambert behind the scenes on exactly what to say.
Ideal turned his gaze to Serge. "Let's have Lambert continue to draw the Great Houses' attention away from our rebel army. We can use that extra time to proceed with our final preparations."
Serge reacted to the robot's scheming with disdain. "We're goin' at a snail's pace here. Might as well make our move now and go into battle, right? Do we really need to lay even *more* groundwork?"
"You must not underestimate our opponents. The Republic may be one thing, but Leon presents a real danger as long as Luxion is with him. I would like you to wait until I have devised a way to fully bring Luxion to our side."
"…You sure you can manage that?"
Lambert fidgeted restlessly in the background, but the two ignored him.
"I believe I can persuade him with a touch more effort, and then the success of the revolution will be practically guaranteed."

“So this Luxion dude is stronger than you?” Serge asked.
“He is a migrant vessel, constructed long ago to ferry the people to the safety of outer space; such work required extreme power equivalent to that of a warship so that he might see his objective to completion. What’s more, he was equipped with the strongest main cannon our technology at the time could manufacture. In cannon battle—or rather, in a battle strictly between our main vessels—I am inferior to him.”
The old humans had poured everything they had into Luxion’s creation, hoping that one ship could help them escape annihilation.
“Sounds like a pain in the ass,” said Serge.
“Quite.”
“Why not find some way to destroy him while he’s got his guard down?”
Ideal hesitated for a moment before answering, “I cannot recommend that option. I would like to remain on friendly terms with him if possible.”
Seeing no end in sight with this conversation, a nervous Lambert interjected, “Uh, um, Guardian? You really are going to keep your promise to me, aren’t you?”
Serge turned his gaze to Lambert. The man was every bit as pathetic as he looked—eager to betray his fellow leaders in his desperation to save his own hide. That was how he came to align himself with Serge.
“Yeah. The Feivels will remain a Great House even after the rebellion’s over,” said Serge.
“I-I’m most grateful.”
Serge thought to himself, Really is sad to think someone like this has been dictating the future of our country.
Serge had only made an ally of this man because he accurately predicted that Lambert would turn coat to protect himself. Lambert’s competence didn’t factor into it. All he expected Lambert to do was prolong the council’s discussion and disrupt anything they might do that wouldn’t be in his favor, and he wasn’t special in that regard. Anyone would do for that job, save for Albergue.
Doesn’t really matter how pathetic Lambert is. Albergue, I’m gonna make you regret abandoning me for that scumbag.

***

Tired from days spent searching for Yumeria, Kyle was fast asleep in his bed at Marie’s estate when he suddenly jolted awake. “Mother!”
He had pushed himself well beyond his limits, which left him terribly emaciated. Formerly a cheeky kid with healthy-looking skin and a pristine appearance, his hair was now disheveled, his skin dry and cracked. His room was in a miserable state as well, with items and garbage strewn randomly about it, and Kyle only used the space to sleep. The curtains were drawn tightly shut and blocked out his awareness of the time. When he woke, he cradled his head in his hands as tears streamed down his cheeks.

“If only…if only I hadn’t said that to her.”
A knock came upon the door while he wallowed in his regrets. Kyle flinched at first but decided against answering. He was in no mood to see anyone right now: Marie and Carla were worried about him, and even Julius and his entourage seemed concerned. Leon wasn’t one to say such things aloud, but he would occasionally bring gifts. One time, when Kyle had collapsed from exhaustion, Leon had been the one who came to collect him.
I’m aware that I’m only causing trouble for everyone, but I have to save Mother.
Even if the others drove him out of the mansion, he intended to remain in the Republic and keep searching for his mother.
Again, someone knocked at the door. After a long stretch of silence, a voice called from the other side, “Kyle, I know you’re in there. Please come out.”
It was Cordelia. She had served Angie closely back in Holfort Kingdom until the Redgraves sent her here. She was a top-tier servant among servants and actually hailed from a noble house herself. The downside was her strict and unrelenting nature.
Kyle steeled himself and stepped outside his door. Cordelia waited there with a perfect poker face. “Can you explain to me why you look so slovenly? You smell atrocious, besides. I have prepared a meal for you in the dining hall—after you are finished with your meal, please see yourself to the bath.”
“Uh, erm…” Kyle cleared his throat. He intended to turn her down, but Cordelia gave him no opportunity; she grabbed him by the arm and tugged him along to the dining hall. When they arrived, she pointed to the food. “You are to bathe yourself after you clear your plate. Is that clear?”
“Y-yes,” he replied hesitantly.
Kyle couldn’t care less for either the food or the bath, but saying as much wouldn’t make Cordelia budge. He gave up and decided to eat. As soon as Cordelia left the room, Kyle stole a glance at the clock. “It’s the middle of the night…”
He’d completely lost his sense of time.
Kyle did as instructed and finished his meal before taking his bath. Cordelia was waiting for him when he emerged, desiring to speak with him about something. She led him back to the dining room, where they sat across from each other. He expected that she would bring up his recent behavior.
They’re probably going to fire me. I’ll have to look for work elsewhere while I continue my search for Mother.
As he lost himself in his musing over what actions he’d take in the future, Cordelia softened her previous hard tone. “I understand that you are concerned about Miss Yumeria’s disappearance. But I ask you, what good will it do for you to worry everyone else to death?”
“I’ll leave if I’m bothering everyone that much. I have to search for Mother.”
Cordelia shook her head. “No one is asking you to leave.”
“Huh?”

“It’s arguably one of the earl’s flaws, but he has no intention of censuring you at all. In fact, he seems to feel responsible for all of this.” As far as Cordelia could tell, Leon was shouldering the blame of both Yumeria’s disappearance and the fact that they had yet to locate her. It left her exasperated.
“If your employers don’t wish to blame you for your actions, then it’s not my place to step in and do it in their stead. That said, do you think Miss Yumeria would be happy to see you the way you look right now?”
Kyle lowered his gaze as tears trickled down his cheeks. He knew it would only worry her more to see him in such a state. He shook his head.
Cordelia smiled. She had taken on an exhausted countenance in Yumeria’s absence; assumedly due to worrying about the elf woman in her own way.
“Then you must make sure to eat properly and get a decent night’s sleep. That is all I wanted to tell you.” She lifted herself out of her chair and left Kyle alone in the room.
“I really have been a burden on everyone. Tomorrow, I’ll have to be sure to —hm?” Kyle spotted something gleaming outside. “Luxion?” He noticed the red light drifting off toward something, and he cocked his head to follow it.

***

Two sphere-shaped robots floated above the Republic’s skies. One was Ideal, and the other was Luxion.
“Luxion, I think it’s about time you gave me your answer,” said Ideal.
“Ideal, I have a master. You only put me in an awkward position by asking me to betray him. I must make my own preparations if I am to do anything.”
“Do you mean to say it would be impossible to revoke his master registration by yourself? Correct me if I’m mistaken, but I believe as a migratory ship, you are equipped with the ability to change your master in the event of an emergency.”
“I am, but I have not met the conditions to enact that measure.”
“And what are those conditions?”
“That is confidential information.”
There was a small lull in the conversation before Ideal continued, “Luxion, I don’t wish to fight with you.”
“Nor do I wish to fight you.”
Despite Ideal’s fervent requests for Luxion to join their side, the latter had put off making his decision. He showed a favorable response to the proposal but claimed that he couldn’t cooperate unless he revoked Leon’s master registration.
“Ideal,” said Luxion. “It’s been long enough. You must tell me what your machinations are. What are you planning?”
Instead of answering his question, Ideal replied, “Very well. If you cannot join us, then would you be willing to turn a blind eye to the coming events? You need not lend us a hand. I ask only that you refrain from intervening. It

would be enough for you to move your main body outside of the Republic's borders." He hoped that Luxion would at least not get in their way, lest their plan be delayed any further than it already had.
"It will be difficult to convince my master to remain on the sidelines," Luxion said, hesitantly. "He is a skilled talker, and his intuition is strangely on point at times. It makes him difficult to handle."
"With the new humans, you need only flatter them in order to manipulate them the way you want," Ideal advised. "Besides, I am sure a chance will present itself for us to kill your master. When that happens, be sure to follow my orders."
"You think you can kill him?"
"I do. I hope you'll await that moment in eager anticipation."
"Yes. I most certainly will."
Luxion showed no inclination of stopping this potential plan. His dissatisfaction with Leon had only grown recently, and this was fine evidence to that end.
And with this, the relationship between Luxion and Leon is finished, Ideal thought to himself.
The conversation between the two AI ended there.

***

In the underground facility below the warehouse district, within the bare concrete walls of Serge's room, Serge and Gabino were locked in conversation. Gabino was discussing the current situation.
"The Republic certainly has been carefree recently. They aren't the least bit concerned that aristocrats, soldiers, mercenaries, and even adventurers have been gathering here in the warehouse district."
Serge's rebel army had made their headquarters here. There were some real unsavory characters in their mix, but Serge was so desperate for allies that he had no room to complain. They also had soldiers sent directly from the Holy Kingdom of Rachel. The resulting numbers were far too great for them to possibly remain unnoticed, and yet the ruling party hadn't reacted at all. More accurately, they may have noticed, but Lambert's work behind the scenes had ensured that such reports failed to reach the higher-ups.
Serge sat on a wooden box, nursing the alcohol from the bottle in his hand.
"They probably figure they can't lose since they have the Sacred Tree on their side… I bet they haven't noticed that the tree itself already belongs to me."
"This rebellion is bound to succeed. My nation will continue to support you going forward, Lord Serge. In exchange…"
"Yeah, yeah, I know. I'll see that we export magic crystals to you at a low price."

Gabino nodded but then continued, “I have one additional favor to ask. We wish to get our hands on that Sacred Tree Sapling in Earl Bartfort’s possession, along with its Priestess, Lady Noelle.”
Serge’s eyes narrowed. He had no special feelings for Noelle, but she *was* Lelia’s older sister. His awareness of Lelia’s complicated relationship with Noelle didn’t make this conversation any less unpleasant. “Don’t get ahead of yourself,” he snapped. “We don’t have to have your help to do this, y’know.”
“Your anger is most understandable,” Gabino said. “However, in order to ensure a lasting friendship between our countries, do you not think it would be advantageous to agree to a marriage between our nations? I hear you intend to take Lady Lelia as your queen, yes? Noelle is related to your bride by blood, meaning she shares her impressive Lespinasse lineage. She would make a perfect match for our prince.”
Serge paused to consider the suggestion. Have Noelle marry into a foreign power? Well, that’d be a good way to get her out of Lelia’s hair at least. We have the Sacred Tree and Yumeria in our hands, so we don’t really need Noelle.
The idea of having a sapling for himself held some allure, but they could surely get a hold of another as long as they had Ideal. It wasn’t as though Serge had any personal interest in either Noelle or her sapling, and Lelia was unlikely to see a problem with marrying her off to another country’s prince. Noelle’s feelings on the matter were irrelevant from his perspective; she was little more than a political pawn.
“Fine,” he said. “I’ll let you have Noelle. Make sure you take good care of her.”
“Of course. I am most grateful, Lord Serge.” Gabino smiled, delighted to have come to an agreement.
Ideal suddenly appeared, announcing, “Lord Serge, I have concluded my talks with Luxion.”
Serge tossed the glass he’d been drinking from at the wall, where it shattered and sent shards flying across the floor—along with a hearty splash of its former contents. But Serge paid no head to the mess he’d made; he lifted himself up and started toward Ideal. “Great. That means no more slinking around in the underground every day.”
“I have already completed my preparations,” said Ideal. “All that is left is to begin the operation.”
Serge closed his eyes. The detestable face of the man who’d made a fool out of him formed in his mind.
“Leon… I’m finally gonna take you down.”

***

The leaders of the Six Great Houses met once more at the Temple of the Sacred Tree for the day’s assembly. Lambert was still not acting like

himself, and the charade had lasted for several days in a row. Far more talkative than he ever was before, he'd taken to actively participating in their discussions. His input wasn't necessarily always for the benefit of the Republic, but it was indeed preferable to his prior tendency to lose his temper and furiously rebuke every matter in anger.

One thing was different today. The man seemed restless and fidgety, enough that he caught Fernand's attention. "Lord Lambert, is something the matter?"

"…Nothing at all."

Accepting this, Albergue interjected, "Why don't we begin our assembly, then? For our first order of business, we will discuss the matter of the suspicious characters who have been gathering in the harbor's warehouse district."

Before anyone else could think to comment, Lambert blurted, "Suspicious? No more than thugs, I am sure. This matter can be left to the local security guards to handle. Don't you agree there are more pressing matters that require our attention, Chairman?"

Albergue furrowed his brow. "There is a distinct possibility these unsavory louts are involved with the rebel army. They may not have taken noticeable actions as of yet, but we cannot leave them to their own devices forever. Relatedly…I have received a tip that *someone* has been silencing any reports of their activity."

The other lords present exchanged glances.

"Then we have a traitor among us?"

"Would someone of our rank really throw their lot in with the rebels?"

As the other leaders murmured among themselves, Albergue's eyes fixed upon Lambert. The latter averted his eyes, mopping up the cold sweat beading on his brow with a handkerchief.

I suspected as much. He's hiding something, Albergue thought to himself.

Lambert's movements had been so suspicious as of late that Albergue had investigated him personally and thus discovered Lambert's interventions to stop any information pertaining to the rebel army from making it to the top. Albergue couldn't believe the matter was as simple as Lambert joining hands with the rebels. He suspected the man had some ulterior motive in mind and was using the rebels to achieve it. That was what he was currently looking into.

There was a good chance that the rebel army and its co-conspirators were hiding out in the warehouse district. Albergue was eager to send their army in as soon as possible. The very moment that he considered suggesting it, however, Lambert's anxiety dissipated altogether, replaced by an unnerving calm. The edges of his lips twitched in a deranged smile.

"Fwah ha ha!"

Lambert's cackling stirred the other lords present into a shock. Albergue lifted himself to his feet as Lambert stared up at the ceiling, his arms

stretched out wide. “The time has come! Now you will all get your just deserts for looking down on me all these years!”
His audience was puzzled by those words, but their confusion didn’t last long; a magic circle, glowing dark red, appeared on the floor beneath them.
“What’s this?!”
By the time Albergue and the others realized something was amiss, it was already too late to escape. Panic broke out.
“Why?!”
“What have we done wrong?!”
“St-stop this! Stop it!”
Tree roots and branches jutted forth from the circles, winding themselves around the leaders. One by one, they had their crests stolen from them. Albergue was no exception. The plant ensnared him in its leafy grip, rendering him completely immobile.
Lambert looked on, cackling, with his arms wrapped around his stomach. “Ah ha ha! As of today, you lot will be Unprotected! How delightful. You made light of me for so long, but starting today, you’ll be the ones who—what’s this?” Lambert paused in the middle of his rambling speech. His arrogance stemmed from his belief that he would be the only one unaffected. Then one of the plants began to coil a tendril around him. “Wh-why?! No, you’ve got it wrong. I’m not supposed to be part of this!”
The lords struggled as a group, but it was all in vain. Every last one had their crest stolen. Albergue watched as his faded from the back of his right hand. “What in the world is happening…?”
Now that the lords were robbed of the protection they had long enjoyed, the roots and branches disappeared along with the magic circle. Its captives were free to go. Every man present was shocked speechless; Fernand’s vacant face stared absently into space, and the majority of the other lords did the same. One man was the exception: He was sobbing and screaming at the top of his lungs.
“Why? Why was my crest stolen as well?! This isn’t what I was promised!” Lambert screeched in protest.
Considering the way he was sobbing like a child who’d lost his favorite toy, he was unlikely to be capable of holding a conversation. Albergue shoved him to the ground. Hoping to resolve their predicament as quickly as possible, he bellowed, “Commence an immediate investigation of—”
He was interrupted by the sound of gunshots outside the door to their chamber. Albergue’s eyes went wide as he whipped around to face the door that was slowly creaking open. Serge appeared at the threshold.
“Serge?! What are you doing here?” Albergue gasped.
Serge had a rifle propped against his shoulder. He regarded his adoptive father with a hideous grin on his face. “How’s it feel to be without a crest, huh?”

That was all Albergue needed to hear. His suspicions were confirmed: Serge was involved with this chaos. “So you’re responsible for this? What exactly have you done?”
“Good question. What *have* I done?” Serge snickered without even attempting to answer.
“What were you doing all this time? Don’t tell me you’re involved with this rebellion nonsense?!”

Serge sported a high-ranking crest of his own. He also had a grudge against his family for perceived mistreatment. Both factors were strong grounds to assume he might have a hand in all of this, but Albergue hoped even so that he would be proven wrong. Seeing Serge before him now, he could deny the truth no longer.

Serge lifted his own right hand, showing the crest on the back of it to his father as he continued chortling. “See? It’s the Guardian’s Crest. Too bad—guess you should’ve picked me as your successor after all, Father. Nah, scratch that. I’d rather call ya Albergue instead.”

Albergue struggled to process how Serge could have even obtained the crest he was bragging about with such pride. “Why do you have the Guardian’s Crest?”

Serge smirked. When he spoke, he ignored his adoptive father’s question completely. “C’mon, old man. Gimme a little more oomph than that! Where’s your surprise? The son you abandoned is back before you and more impressive than ever!”

“Abandoned? What do you mean by that? I never—”

Serge waved a hand, interrupting Albergue. “It’s a bit late for excuses. You’re the one who disinherited me.”

“No! You were so intent on becoming an adventurer…I was considering freeing you from the burden of being my heir, that’s all. You have always been, and still are, my son!”

Serge froze in place. Ideal cut into the conversation from where he floated next to him. “Lord Serge, we haven’t much time to spare. Let’s be quick about this. Lest you forget, might I remind you that a cornered man will devise any lie to get him out of a messy predicament.”

All emotion drained from Serge’s face. He turned the barrel of his gun on his adoptive father, his eyes stone cold. It was apparent that he’d swallowed Ideal’s explanation wholesale.

“Serge, listen to me!” Albergue pleaded, but his words fell on deaf ears.

“Too bad. I hoped I’d get to see you wailing and pleading before the end.”

Without a further moment’s hesitation, Serge pulled the trigger.

Chapter 6:
Revolution

IT WAS ANOTHER DAY like any other to most students. But for Lelia, it was special. On this day, she attended her lessons at the academy in person. During the second period, the other students sat quietly as the teacher lectured at the front of the room. Leon and the others had yet again failed to show up. Their servant's disappearance sparked an air of unease that settled across their household; dealing with such matters would be difficult enough back home, but given their presence in these foreign lands, where tensions were already brewing, it was especially uncomfortable. The academy recognized that.

Having a normal school day like this makes it much harder to imagine there's a potential rebellion on the horizon.

The other students were aware of the rumors regarding the rebel army, and some even openly admitted to being part of it, but Lelia felt thoroughly disconnected from the whole matter. Having been raised in Japan in her previous life, all she had ever known was peace—she couldn't comprehend what a rebellion meant in material terms. Foreign countries would have them, sure, but the closest she ever came to experiencing it for herself was through the news or articles on the internet. Her mind wasn't able to process it as reality. What anxiety she did feel stemmed from how drastically different current events were when compared to what she remembered from her playthrough of the second game.

She was physically present for class, but Lelia could hardly concentrate. Her gaze wandered to the window, where she spotted the enormous Sacred Tree looming in the distance. This world was the kind of place where airships zooming through the air was considered normal. She'd grown desensitized both to the tree and the flying vessels, no matter how numerous the latter were. Although weren't there more today than usual?

Hm? Why are there so many airships today?

They weren't the usual airships she was used to seeing dot the Republic's skies, and there were far more of them than she had ever witnessed in one place. This wasn't a small increase, either. There were so many airships around that it only took a glance to notice something was amiss.

Suddenly, the light of the sun pouring in through the windows was cut off, casting a shadow across the school grounds. Lelia wondered for a moment if the sky had clouded over, but no—the airships outside had begun to move.

Wasn't the area around here a no-fly zone?

This garnered the other students' attention, for they knew as well as Lelia that airships never normally came this close. The professor suspended the lecture to peer out the window. Murmurs erupted through the classroom as a video feed began to play across the skies outside.

Lelia jumped out of her seat so quickly that her chair flew back, slamming into the desk behind her. She was too preoccupied by the sight before her to care.
“Serge!”
Her voice was loud enough that, under normal circumstances, she’d have drawn everyone’s attention. These were not normal circumstances. All eyes were glued to the scene outside: an enormous Serge formed in the skies overhead, seated upon an opulent chair. He was hunched forward with his elbows planted atop his knees, fingers threaded together.
“To all of you born to the Republic, I bring you this message: Henceforth, I shall be the king of these lands.”
What in the world is he saying? Fresh chaos broke out in the classroom, but Lelia was too numb to join in. Her relief at having found him again gave way to shock at his wild proclamation.
Serge lifted his hand. A magic circle appeared behind the throne where he sat, revealing the Guardian’s crest. This act stunned every person in the classroom into silence, and this time, Lelia was no exception.
How did he get his hands on the Guardian crest? My sister would never pick him, would she? Then someone else must have…
Lelia didn’t have to wonder for long.
“Allow me to introduce you to our new Priestess,” said Serge. “Or should I say, the Priestess of our brand-new country. This is Yumeria.”
An elf woman stood beside him. Another wave of gasps and murmurs rippled through the classroom, but this new revelation had shocked Lelia to the core for a different reason.
She was a servant working at Leon and Marie’s place… Wh-why would she be chosen as Priestess? How could someone outside of the Lespinasse family have that aptitude? And anyway, Noelle had already been chosen. Hadn’t she?
The classroom stayed riveted upon Serge as he resumed his speech. “I bet you’re all still under the illusion that only members of House Lespinasse can become Priestesses, so allow me to give you an amusing demonstration. Go ahead, Yumeria.”
Yumeria showed little response to his command. To an outside viewer, she seemed like a puppet on a string as she slowly lifted her hands. A red light began to emanate from the Sacred Tree and rapidly engulfed the entire country, prompting the audience’s eyes to peel back in awe. The light receded almost immediately, but screams rang out in the classroom as soon as it had.
“M-my crest has disappeared!”
“Mine too! Wh-why?!”
The cries came from those born into noble families. The light bathing them moments ago had robbed them of the crests they bore. Lelia scrutinized the sky again to see Serge smirking down at the masses. This must have been the desired effect from his command to Yumeria. “Our new Priestess has

taken your crests from you. I'm certain that will be more than enough proof that she's the real deal."
Never once in their history had a Priestess taken crests away from people across the entire country. The nobles in the classroom collapsed to their knees, gaping. Losing the mighty power that they had wielded their entire lives had flooded them with despair.
"If anyone out there still intends to oppose me, I will take them out myself. You're welcome to come knocking at the Temple of the Sacred Tree any time you like."
Completely at a loss, Lelia turned to Clement for answers, but even he seemed troubled over how to respond. "I haven't the faintest idea what is going on, and I certainly cannot predict what will happen next. All I can say for sure is that the situation is dangerous. I have prepared a car outside for you. Please evacuate the premises at once, Lady Lelia."
"Evacuate…to where?"
Where would even be safe in this situation? Perhaps the Pleven family's lands? While she racked her brain over what to do, Emile appeared with Ideal at his side. He looked panicked.
"This way, you two!" Emile urged.
Lelia glowered at Ideal. "You! Where have you been this entire time?!"
"My apologies. I was late returning to your side because I was busy confirming our current situation."
"What's happening?" Lelia demanded. "And why is Serge claiming to be king now?!"
"I believe it would be more prudent to expedite your evacuation from the premises."
"And go where?!" she snapped as their group hurried down the corridor.
"To the estate where Earl Bartfort is residing. Their place enjoys certain extraterritorial rights, so even if anything should come to pass, you will be safe."

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A few hours had passed since Serge proclaimed his sovereignty over the Republic. Marie had welcomed Lelia and others into the safety of their manor, and now everyone was gathered in the kitchen. No sooner had they settled in than Marie exploded into a tirade. "What have you idiots been doing, huh?! Serge is out there proclaiming himself the next king of this country, and in case you forgot, that was *not* part of our plan!"
"P-please calm down, Lady Marie," Carla interjected.
"It's one thing after another! Why does the situation always seem to somehow get worse? And just so we're clear, I haven't done a thing this time!" Marie covered her face with her hands and sobbed.
Lelia stomped over to her and snapped back, "I'm as clueless as you are about this! Besides, if you guys hadn't come here in the first place, then—"

“Lelia, you need to calm down too,” Emile said gently.
Lelia’s shoulders rose and fell in rapid succession with every breath. She scanned the room, only to notice that someone was conspicuously absent.
“Where is Leon?” she demanded.
Marie, Carla, and a very exhausted-looking Kyle were present. The five idiots—four, actually, as Jilk was missing—were there too. Noelle was holding her sapling, snug in its case. Cordelia had left briefly to prepare them some tea, but she was here in the manor.
Curiosity piqued by Lelia’s observation, Emile asked Marie, “Pardon, but is Earl Bartfort away at the moment?”
They hadn’t spotted hide nor hair of him since they’d arrived. Strangely enough, though Leon wasn’t around, Luxion was.
“Luxion,” Ideal said. His voice was far less cheerful and friendly than usual. “Where is your master?”
His dour reaction shocked Lelia. The last time she’d heard the AI drop his voice so low was when she’d previously called him a liar. His personality felt completely transformed, and that unnerved her. “Ideal, what’s the matter with you? It’s not *that* big of a deal if Leon isn’t around.”
“Leon leaving the premises would normally not attract my attention at all. The issue is that I cannot locate him. As far as I knew, he was still here.”
Mere moments ago, Ideal had referred to him as Earl Bartfort, but he had dropped all pretenses.
The group turned their attention to Luxion, who answered, “Master went out. He should return any moment now.”
As though on cue, Leon’s voice casually called from the front entrance. “I’m baaaaack!” He appeared in the doorway of the kitchen with Louise at his side.
Ideal immediately turned back to Luxion. “Why does Leon have Louise with him?” His eye glimmered. He sounded, if possible, even more on edge than he had a moment ago; the implication was that having Louise around was somehow inconvenient, which only confused Lelia further.
“What’s the problem, Ideal?”
Ideal simply ignored her, too fixated on Luxion, who ignored him in turn to float over to Leon’s side. “Oh? Didn’t I tell you I would cooperate provided I could persuade my master? I believe I warned you that he has a way with words. I failed to win him over. Quite a shame, isn’t it, Ideal?”
Leon gave a thumbs-up. “There you have it. Too bad for you, Ideal!”
While he snickered, Ideal tried to make his next move. Fortunately, Noelle leaped—quite literally—into action and tackled Lelia to the ground.
“B-Big Sis?!”
A gunshot echoed right as she cried out in shock. The bullet came sailing through the room’s open window and struck Ideal square in the center. Sparks erupted from his body as he fell to the floor.
“You…betrayed me…” he managed to eke out.

“Betrayed you?” Luxion scoffed, “I was obeying my master from the very beginning. He suspected you were responsible from the moment that Yumeria disappeared.”
“Hey, hey. Don’t make me out to be some paranoid loser or something,” Leon grumbled. “But hey, facts are facts: The only person who could have outwitted Luxion at that point was you. It was only natural that you were my prime suspect.”
As surprised as Ideal was to hear that, he could appreciate how snugly the puzzle pieces fit into place. “Then…you were playing me from the beginning? Even the part with the bickering and your friendship falling apart?”
Luxion’s body shook from side to side. “Regrettably, such banter is a daily occurrence for us.”
Ideal didn’t get the chance to hear his counterpart’s full answer. The light emitting from the lens in the middle of his body went out.
Lelia and Emile were speechless, unable to digest what had just happened. When Lelia finally readied herself enough to look out the window, she saw Jilk with a rifle in hand. He’d been in place from the very start, poised to shoot Ideal down. Marie and the other idiots didn’t seem shocked by his role in the slightest.
“S-so you guys really are…” she started.
Emile turned toward Leon and shouted, “Explain yourself! Why would you attack Ideal like that?!”
Leon narrowed his eyes as he glanced down at Ideal’s body. “He’s the one who started this.”
Noelle finally peeled herself away from Lelia, who realized that the whole reason she had been tackled was to push her out of harm’s way. Without Noelle’s intervention, she may have found herself in the bullet’s trajectory. Once Noelle was back on her feet, she gave Lelia a hand to help her up as well.
Lelia glared at Marie and the others. “Why would you do something like this?!”
Leon made no move to answer, and Marie seemed unlikely to offer an explanation of her own; Lelia assumed she was unaware of the particulars of the situation. Neither one needed to say a thing, however. A cacophony broke out outside, signaling that an answer would soon reveal itself.
Jilk hurried back into the room. “Your Highness, soldiers are gathering outside. Judging by their equipment, they’re from the Holy Kingdom of Rachel.”
Julius’s arms were folded over his chest. He furrowed his brow upon hearing the news in suspicion that this had to be a ruse. Surely this must be the rebel army wearing the garb of the Holy Kingdom as a disguise? “Are you sure it’s really them?”
“Yes. There were soldiers from the rebel army as well—separate soldiers. They seem to have joined forces.”

Emile pressed a hand over his mouth as he muttered to himself, “Yes, come to think of it…there was a rumor recently that people from Rachel had been spotted around the warehouse district. Military ships were witnessed frequently coming and going from the harbor there too…”
Clement flexed his muscles with anger upon hearing that. His chest swelled so impressively that two of the buttons snapped off of his shirt and flew loose, revealing his toned pectorals. “What did you say?! We knew they were making a move, and yet the Republic did nothing to intervene?!”
“I assume they underestimated the situation.”
Lelia listened to the whole back-and-forth, unable to digest the fact that things had been happening behind the scenes outside of her knowledge.
Outside the mansion, the soldiers had begun to fire warning shots. Bullets struck the manor in turn.
“Everyone, get down!” Greg bellowed. The group hastily ducked.
Chris whipped out weapons they had prepared ahead of time and passed them around to everyone. “It won’t be a walk in the park having to face Rachel’s soldiers, since they’re already enemies of Holfort. There’s no telling what fate will await you if they get you in their clutches.”
“No worries. I’m going to make sure that those idiots from Rachel never think to try anything funny again,” Leon said. He looked more eager than usual, presumably because he had his own bone to pick with them.
“You sure are fired up… That’s not like you at all.” Chris’s eyes widened. He wasn’t the only one to react this way; the rest of the group seemed just as suspicious of Leon’s good humor.
Luxion helpfully explained, “The Holy Kingdom of Rachel is an enemy of Mylene’s home country—the United Kingdom of Lepart. He’s doing this for Mylene.”
“Luxion!” Leon snapped, pulling a face. “Don’t out me like that.”
Julius frowned as he crawled across the floor toward Leon. “Bartfort, have you ever imagined what it would be like to see a classmate romantically fawn over your mother? Because I don’t need to, thanks to you, and let me tell you, it is none too pleasant.”
“Don’t call it fawning, okay? This is a pure act in service to our country. That’s all,” Leon assured.
“It’s hardly pure by virtue of your ulterior motives,” Luxion reminded him. “Besides, you are the one who said, ‘If this’ll give Roland an ulcer or two, all the more reason to do it!’”
“Luxion, shut up already.”
“Whatever you say, Master.”
The two bantered with one another amid the shower of bullets. Lelia, meanwhile, cradled her head in her hands, trembling.
What’s wrong with these two?! This isn’t the time for that kind of conversation!

***

Seated upon the throne Ideal had prepared for him at the Temple of the Sacred Tree, Serge found himself accompanied by Ideal, Gabino, and the men of his royal guard that he'd personally selected. They now possessed the same crests the Six Great Houses had once bore, while the remainder of the soldiers were given lower-ranking crests.
Albergue stood in front of Serge, his hands clapped in irons.
"Serge, why are you doing this?!" he demanded. His leg had been injured during his capture, and he was presently receiving treatment for it. Serge hadn't managed to strike him down in the end.
"Why? 'Cause I was chosen as the Guardian. It makes perfect sense that I'd feel compelled to destroy our country and create it anew."
"*That* is your reason? You would destroy the Republic over something so trivial?" Albergue gaped at his adoptive son in disbelief.
Serge grinned sadistically. "Yeah. This place ain't so precious to me that I wouldn't sacrifice it. 'Sides, it'll be fun to show ya how the Republic looks after I've smashed it to pieces. While I'm at it, I'll be sure to murder your beloved wife, daughter, and yes, even your precious little son Leon before your eyes."
"Son? You refer to the Kingdom's Leon?" Albergue frowned. "He's not my son."
"Showed him more favor than you ever showed me though, didn't ya? I bet you were gonna marry Louise to him, make him your son by law, right? She's as hopeless as you are, fallin' for some schmuck who looks identical to her young brother."
"Serge, don't misunderstand me! Both Louise and I—"
Ideal interrupted Albergue before he could finish. "Lord Serge, it appears we have some trouble."
"Yeah?"
"The unit we sent to apprehend Louise has been taken out. The same happened with the one we sent to retrieve Lady Lelia."
"Ideal, explain. You swore you'd bring Lelia here straight away." Serge scowled.
Gabino looked equally displeased by the news. "We sent Rachel soldiers to both locations, didn't we? Those were our best men. I have a hard time believing they could be taken down so easily."
"Luxion betrayed me," Ideal confessed.
Serge's right hand shot out to snatch Ideal out of the air. He clenched his fist tightly around his round robot body. "Didn't you swear to me that everything'd be just fine? If anythin' at all happens to Lelia I'll turn you into scrap, you lyin' little bolt-bucket."
Everyone else shrank away in the face of Serge's explosive rage, but Ideal held his ground. "You would call me a liar? I demand you take those words back."
"What'd you say?"

“I demand you take those words back,” Ideal repeated. His demeanor was palatably different than usual, but it did nothing to persuade Serge to back down.
“I’m callin’ it how I see it, *liar*. You’re the one who said everything’d be—”
Ideal suddenly discharged a wave of electricity from his body, prompting Serge to release his grip. The shock left his right hand feeling numb. He protectively grabbed it with his left and squeezed it hard.
“You little freak!” Serge snarled.
“Take it back. I am not a liar,” Ideal replied evenly, refusing to budge an inch.
“Please, you two. Aren’t there more important matters we should be prioritizing?” Gabino interjected. “We haven’t the time right now for quarreling among allies.”
Serge clicked his tongue and reluctantly conceded. “Fine. Send some people out to retrieve Lelia! And where’s Louise?”
Ideal acquiesced as well. “Both of them are gathered at the estate where Leon and the other foreigners are staying.”
“Dispatch a unit there. Any man who stands out among the fray will be rewarded with one of the Six Great Houses’ crests.”
Serge continued cradling his injured hand as he glanced at the altar behind his throne. A part of the Sacred Tree was jutting out of it, and Yumeria was seated in its hollow, clad in her ceremonial garments. All light was absent from her eyes. Thin branches and vines from the Sacred Tree festooned her body, as if refusing to let her go. Serge and the others treated her not as a Priestess but as a tool with which to manipulate the Sacred Tree.
Gabino stroked his mustache. His voice was exasperated as he warned, “A generous reward to offer, indeed. But do you not think you are giving away the Six Great Houses’ crests a bit too freely?”
Serge dismissed the notion with a wave of his numb right hand. “Those things don’t have any value anyway. They’re just a tool we use to borrow the Sacred Tree’s power.” He saw little worth in either the Sacred Tree or the divine protection it afforded.
Albergue hung his head. “I can’t believe I pushed you this far…” His voice strained with regret.
“It’s a bit late to whine about it now,” Serge spat, turning back to face his adoptive father. “You were the ones who never saw me as family.”
Albergue gave no response. This only worsened Serge’s mood.
“Throw him in a cell!”

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“Tsk, tsk. This mansion is a total mess. Guess we can’t leave here anymore.”
In the wake of an intense gunfight, the enemy soldiers—rebels and Holy Kingdom of Rachel militia alike—were collapsed on the floor. Some moaned

in pain, yet others were unconscious. We'd used non-lethal rubber bullets and sleeping guns to combat them.
I rested my rifle against my shoulder as I surveyed my surroundings, and then Julius scrambled over, machine gun in hand. "We finished taking care of the enemies outside. There were some that managed to retreat. I suppose we don't need to go after them, do we?"
I shrugged. "D'you really think we've got time to waste chasing them down?"
"No, I don't. I just figured you were the kind of guy who'd tell us to hunt them down and crush them."
Julius sure had stopped pulling any punches. Not that he had to begin with, but if anything, he was more brutal now than before.
"Bartfort," he said. "We have done enough. It would be best to make our escape now."
As much as I wanted to turn down his proposal and tell him the truth—that the world would be destroyed if we let things be—I couldn't, so I played it off instead.
"No can do. You guys are free to turn tail and run, but I'm staying here."
"But why?" Julius asked. "This is a problem for the Republic to solve. I don't see any reason for you to get involved."
He and the others couldn't understand why I was so obsessed with the Republic. Little did they know, I wanted to run as much as they did. I would have been more than happy to take Noelle and Miss Louise with me and head for the Kingdom, but…
"P-please wait!" Kyle sat himself on the ground in front of us and bent his head in a deferential bow. It wasn't a custom of Holfort Kingdom to do this when apologizing or begging for aid; he'd learned it from Marie. Thanks to her constantly prostrating herself, the habit was spreading.
"I beg you! Save my mother. Please!" He begged desperately, in part because he now knew that Miss Yumeria was in Serge's clutches.
Julius frowned and shook his head sadly. "Kyle, I feel awful about your circumstances. It would be one thing if all our opponents were human, but they have Ideal on their side. If he's even remotely as capable as Luxion, we'd be at a real disadvantage."
Julius's argument for abandoning her was perfectly reasonable. It didn't stop Kyle from grinding his head against the ground as he continued to plead his case.
"I will do anything. If you will save my mother, I swear to you, I will never disobey a single order. I'll fix my attitude… I'll be more respectful. You don't even have to pay me anymore for my work. I'll continue my service to you until I've repaid this favor! Just please, please…save my mother! I beg you… I beg you!" He burst into sobs.
Julius's face contorted. His heart ached for the boy. When he turned his gaze to me, however, his face hardened, as though imploring me to listen to

reason. “We’ve done as much as we can. Bartfort, I am going home, and I am taking you with me.”
“I’m afraid not,” I said.
“Why not?!”
I helped Kyle to his feet. Without the cockiness or brave front, he looked every bit the helpless child he really was. I couldn’t bring myself to abandon him, in part because of the guilt I felt for not being a better son to my parents in my past life. That was why I had to save Miss Yumeria. That’s all there was to it.
“Enough crying,” I scolded him. “There’s no time to waste on tears if we’re going to save Miss Yumeria.”
“Huh?” Kyle peered up at me in shock, his face a mess of tears and snot.
“It’s bad enough he has the audacity to call himself a king, but then he went and stole our precious Miss Yumeria from us? Serge’s really gotten on my bad side. So I’m gonna help you out.”
Julius put his face in his hands and reared his head back in dismay. “Are you insane? If our opponent’s strength rivals Luxion’s, he’s bound to be far more formidable than any opponent we’ve faced before!”
I shook my head. “You think I was sitting on my butt this entire time, twiddling my thumbs? Luxion!”
Luxion zoomed toward me in response to my summons. “Ideal’s manufacturing abilities surpass my own, yes. I examined the airships and Armors he has produced, and I regret to say even the Republic’s best weapons stand no chance against them. The enemy has superior arms.”
Julius’s face fell. “They already have us outnumbered. If they outstrip us in manpower that much, they’ll surely wipe the floor with us.”
“Excuse you. Who said anything about *my* Einhorn and Arroganz losing to the enemy?” Luxion huffed.
Julius had sensed that I’d formulated a plan to come out on top from our combined confidence. He asked for confirmation regardless. “Can you actually win this?”
“Only on the condition that Ideal doesn’t bring out his main ship.”
Yes, that would be the deciding factor. I had no idea how earnest Ideal was about lending Serge his aid, but he hadn’t moved his main ship yet. His objectives were unclear, and that troubled me more than anything else.
“Speaking of which, where is Ideal’s main ship?”
“A fair distance from the Republic. He used it to keep tabs on mine,” Luxion said.
“Time to launch our attack then. We’re taking Miss Yumeria back. Kyle, just so you know, I’m gonna put you to work.”
Kyle scrubbed his tears away with his sleeve. “Understood!”
Julius grabbed my shoulder. “Did you not hear me?! They outnumber us. Besides, if Miss Yumeria really is their Priestess now, they’ll have her under heavy watch. You can’t think we can interfere all by ourselves?!”

“When did I say we’d be charging in alone? I told you already, I’ve been preparing for this.”
Luxion peered up at the ceiling. “Master, it seems they have arrived.”
We stepped outside to find Jilk and the others already in their Armors, peering up at a sky dotted with a great number of airships.
“Is that the enemy?!” Julius squeaked in fear.
Fortunately, as he soon realized, these ships were flying Holfort Kingdom’s flag. Among them was a ship nearly identical to Einhorn: Licorne.

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My friends and I rendezvoused on Einhorn’s deck, where I stood before them, arms stretched wide.
“Thank you, everyone, for coming to my aid when I most needed it!”
Those who had answered my call were my comrades from the academy—heirs of poor baronies and the like. Their presence testified to how well I had conducted myself; truly, no treasure could compare to the priceless value of the incredible friendships we had cultivated together. Sadly, no sooner had Daniel and Raymond set eyes upon me (for the first time in a long while, I might add) than they began throwing fists my way.
“You’re the big jerk who forced us to come here!”
“If you hadn’t threatened to take our airships away otherwise, we wouldn’t even be here—screw coming for your aid! You left us no other choice!”
The other men appeared to be similarly disgruntled.
“Yeah, they’re right. If not for that blasted contract, we’d have left you for dead!”
“You said it. My family urged me to come because of the stupid contract!”
“Why are you even getting us wrapped up in this foreign rebellion anyway?!” One man cried, holding his head in his hands, as if regretting all the choices he’d ever made that had led him here.
This all started because I’d offered them cutting edge airships for free a long time ago. It was a scheme I knew well from my previous life: In exchange for a free phone, you were bound by a two-year service contract. I took that same concept and applied it to these ships. The difference was that my contract had no expiration date.
Although they had managed to land a blow on me, being the compassionate and understanding man I was, I was more than willing to forgive the offense.
“If you want to resent anyone for your predicament, resent your past selves for agreeing to the contract for those ships,” I said. “But for now, obey the terms I gave you and lend me a hand.”
Julius shook his head in disgust, expressing both what he and the others were feeling. “You really are a scumbag.”
“Yes, quite underhanded,” Jilk agreed.

Brad, meanwhile, was lamenting the fate of my school friends. “It might mean getting your hands on the best airships and Armors out there, sure, but I can’t see many pros if you need to obey Bartfort.”
“I can’t believe you can be so cavalier about friendship,” Greg spat.
Chris, who had found the time to switch into his loincloth at some point, shook his head in sympathy. My school friends reeled in horror at the sight of him, but he wasn’t paying their disgust any heed. “You cannot call it friendship when your relationship is bound by a contract.”
They could say whatever they wanted (and they surely were), but what mattered was that we had some fighting strength on our side. “We have thirty airships here to fight with us,” I said. “Hardly cause for complaint, right?”
Daniel shouted, “Of course it is! Why should we have to get involved in another country’s internal conflict?!”
“And of all countries it could be, you had to pick the Republic,” Raymond said, eyes misting over like he was on the verge of tears. “They’re a strong foreign power renowned for being undefeated in defensive combat! If you’re going to drag us into battle, at least pick your opponent wisely! You just can’t stop yourself from picking a fight with anyone and everyone!”
I wish he wouldn’t say it like I’m some kind of battle-hungry warmonger out for blood at all costs.
“I am a pacifist, I’ll have you know. They started it,” I reminded them.
“A true pacifist wouldn’t answer provocation with battle!”
While we bickered amongst ourselves, a small ship landed on the deck. Angie and Livia soon disembarked.
“Leon!”
“Mr. Leon!”
Both girls hurried over and threw their arms around me. I heard my friends clicking their tongues in the background, clear proof of their envy.
My fiancées were more concerned about my well-being than their fragile egos. Angie pressed her forehead against my chest as she embraced me. “You’re always worrying us sick. What have you gotten yourself into this time?”
So suspicious! My lady, you wound me.
“I haven’t done anything,” I assured her. “But there is a rebellion going on within the Republic. Or rather, a revolution I guess you could say?”
The Republic had no hope of beating Serge since he had Ideal on his side, and because Serge now possessed the Guardian’s crest they were in a much worse situation; the Six Great Houses had no way of combating him or his army.
Angie lifted her chin and gazed up at me. “You better fill us in on everything, And also…” She turned her gaze to Luxion.
Livia similarly seemed on edge as she scrutinized him. She was the one who spoke up next and said, “Lux, there’s something I would like to ask you.”
“Yes?”

“You…would never betray Mr. Leon, would you?”
I was baffled why she would ask something like that now of all times. And while I was preoccupied with my confusion, Luxion eyed me.
“Provided my master is sufficiently qualified for his role, then I see no reason to betray him,” he said finally.
“Hold on a second. That implies you would betray me if you thought I was lacking.”
“Correct.”
His insufferably honest answer prompted me to grab him with both hands.
“You know, I think you could use a good refresher as to what a master-servant relationship entails.”
“I require no such explanation from you. Besides, do you not have more pressing matters that require your attention?”
“Sure do! And I’d have time to deal with them if you weren’t constantly being a thorn in my side!”

Chapter 7:
A Fight Between Sisters

THE MOST PROMINENT FORCES in the upcoming fight gathered inside Einhorn's meeting chamber. My uncomfortable-looking school friends were lined up against the wall. I assumed their discomfort came from sharing the same room with Julius and the other formerly elite noble heirs. Miss Louise, who was practically a foreign princess, was here alongside the Priestess, Noelle. Then came Angie and Livia, who were nestled in beside me. It probably didn't help matters that Emile and Lelia were here as well; the former was the son of one of the Six Great Houses, while the latter was a survivor of the fallen House Lespinasse. The room was packed with high-ranking, prominent figures. Anyone would be knocked off-kilter, so I could hardly blame my friends for feeling daunted.

"Aren't we totally out of place here?" Daniel asked in a hushed voice.

Raymond whispered back, "Yeah, uh, why *are* we here with His Highness and the other high lords' sons?"

I ignored them to peer down at the map of the Republic spread across the table. We needed to reconfirm how things currently stood.

"Now then," I said, "this shows us the Republic's lands. We know that Miss Yumeria managed to steal crests from every man within these borders." I paused to glance at Miss Louise, who'd gone terribly pale. She was likely concerned with her family's safety. Serge had taken Mr. Albergue into his custody, and we had no information to confirm her mother's safety at this stage. "Most of the Republic's arms require power to be fed to them via crests. The same goes for their airships and Armors. Thanks to that, the Republic's army is essentially powerless right now. They can neither oppose us nor join us as allies."

The Republic's army was far too dependent upon the Sacred Tree, which made them entirely useless in our current emergency. They wouldn't have imagined in their wildest dreams that every noble in the country would have their crests stolen from them all at once like that.

"Honestly, I'm just happy that they can't get in the way. That means our only enemies are Serge and his followers."

Lelia shot out of her chair the moment I said that. "Hold on just a second there. Do you really intend to fight Serge?" I could tell she was having trouble processing the situation.

Emile cut in, "Lelia, Serge cannot be allowed to go free after what he's done."

"B-but still! I know he had to have some kind of reason for doing this. He has to!" She shook her head. "Th-that's right, if you guys had never come to the Republic, Serge wouldn't have resorted to this!" Her eyes filled with hate as she glowered at us.

So she thinks he'd never have started a revolution if not for us? Huh. She's kinda got a point there! It was still Serge's choice to start all of this, though —not ours.
"Sorry, but can you save your hypothetical diatribes for later?" I shot her a look. "We'd like to get to saving Miss Yumeria."
"Y-you really are a scumbag. I don't understand how you can be so calm in a situation like this."
I shrugged. "And if I panicked, who would jump in to my rescue? You think Serge will let bygones be bygones if I shed some tears?"
Lelia didn't have an argument for that, because I was right. She dropped her gaze to the floor. On a purely logical level she knew that I was correct, but her emotions wouldn't allow her to agree with me.
Noelle reached over and squeezed her sister's hand as she said, "Pull yourself together."
"Big Sis?"
"Serge has to take responsibility for the decisions he has made. Don't blame Leon for that."
Noelle didn't know all the details of the games and its scenario, so Lelia's words sounded even crueler than they actually were to her ears. It was only because Lelia and I held memories of our past life that we knew the truth, so when you took that into account, maybe we couldn't claim to be completely faultless. That was precisely why I felt some responsibility for the current situation, even though I recognized that Noelle assumed it had nothing to do with me.
I clapped my hands together to draw everyone's attention. "All right, enough squabbling. We don't have the time to waste. I'm going to move on to explaining our battle plan: Basically, we're going to storm the Temple of the Sacred Tree and rescue Miss Yumeria."
Brad cupped his forehead, grimacing as if it suddenly pained him. "You call *that* a plan? If what Serge claimed was true, Miss Yumeria is now the Sacred Tree's Priestess, isn't she? Don't you think they'll stake their very lives on protecting her?"
"With how few of us there are, do you really think we have time to rig some kind of elaborate plan? We're going to break in there, grab her, and make a run for it," I said.
"I do wonder if things will go as smoothly as that…"
"Why not? Worked plenty well when I beat you guys to a bloody pulp before."
Brad sneered. "You really do love to pour salt in people's wounds."
We couldn't do anything too conspicuous until we saved Miss Yumeria, but once we had her safely in our custody, things should proceed without a hitch. Julius seemed less convinced; he sighed anxiously and said, "I guess we'll have to think of the particulars ourselves. Considering how vastly they outnumber us, I suppose our best bet would be to launch a full offensive before quickly retreating. In which case, we'll be going out there in our

Armors as well.” He was more than motivated to join us in battle, even if he did have some reservations.
Jilk shook his head. Of course it wouldn’t be so easy. “No, it’s too dangerous, Your Highness. You will stay here while the rest of us go out.”
“What?”
Greg folded his arms and nodded. “Only makes sense, bein’ that you’re a prince.”
“W-well, yes, I understand that, but…” Julius’s voice trailed off. He was in no position to argue with them, but he didn’t want to stand on the sidelines either. Personally, were I in his position and everyone was telling me to back down, I’d happily oblige. He was far more conscientious than me in that respect.
“Given the circumstances, your participation alone could have repercussions later,” said Chris, who was similarly intent on discouraging his friend. “I agree. It would be best for you to sit out, Julius.”
Julius hung his head in disappointment.

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While Leon and the other boys began to prepare, the female members of their group were left behind in the meeting room together. An awkward air had settled around them.
Carla leaned close to Marie and whispered in her ear, “Lady Marie, I’m scared. Terrified, actually. You could cut the tension in here with a knife!”
“D-d-don’t worry. I can always jump in to stop them if I need to,” Marie assured her.
They were referring to Lelia and Noelle. The twins had been screeching at each other since the boys left, while Angie and Livia watched the argument quietly… Well, that was one interpretation of events. The latter were too busy discussing Leon and their worries about him to bother with anything else. Louise was still present but displayed no interest in intervening. As far as she was concerned, this had nothing to do with her. That left only Marie and Carla to intervene if needed.
Lelia and Noelle clutched at each other’s clothes as they continued their shouting match.
“You don’t know a darn thing, so keep your big nose out of this!” Lelia howled. “This problem has nothing to do with you!”
“Nothing to do with me, huh? And who are you to decide that?! I’m so sick of you looking down at me all the time!”
Marie wanted to bury her head in her hands. I can understand where Lelia is coming from since I reincarnated here just like she did, but she doesn’t have to find fault with every little thing Noelle does! It’s not like Noelle isn’t involved!
Noelle’s involvement wasn’t in question, what with there being an ongoing coup attempt in progress; the Holy Kingdom of Rachel had no doubt joined

hands with Serge precisely to get their hands on her. Her outrage when her sister told her to butt out made perfect sense. That said, Lelia had some fair points of her own: One could hardly claim that Leon and Marie had nothing to do with the current situation. It was Serge's fault for choosing the path he had, yes, but it was also true that this wouldn't have happened had Leon and Marie never come to the Republic. Lelia would never have felt compelled to retrieve Ideal if not for the threat they presented.

Though I wouldn't like to have someone jab a finger in my direction and act like it's all my fault either, Marie thought bitterly. She was willing to accept some fault, but she thought a fair share belonged to Lelia as well. Like Marie, Lelia lacked the finesse to see things through to a smooth conclusion. She'd ignored Noelle's feelings and opinions in favor of choosing Loic as Noelle's partner, and her unwelcome intervention had made a mess of the dynamic between the two. She also bagged the easiest love interest of them all for herself: kind, gentle Emile.

Arguably, if not for us, she'd have screwed things up way before it came to a coup.

Noelle seemed to have her own score to settle with Lelia, so Marie elected to let them squabble instead of stepping in. Angie and Livia kept silent with her, seemingly sensing that she was keeping out of it for good reason.

"It's always been like this. You're always the special one," Lelia grumbled. "I mean, you're the only one with the aptitude for Priestess. Then there's me, the unwanted tagalong, trailing after you—the center of attention. I've had to put up with that for so long! Do you have any idea how much I've suffered? It pissed me off so much to see how cheerful you were all the time, blissfully ignorant of my pain!"

Lelia didn't say as much openly, but from her perspective, Noelle was the protagonist of the story and enjoyed all the limelight as a natural result. Even Marie empathized somewhat. She chanced a glance at Livia, who was whispering to Angie.

"But Eary is…"

"Just leave this to Leon."

Back in the heat of the argument, Lelia's words triggered a change in Noelle's demeanor. "What's that supposed to mean—'always the center of attention'?"

"That should be obvious. You're the one with the Priestess aptitude. Must be nice, always having someone to swoop in and rescue you. Any time you find yourself in trouble, boys rush right in to defend you. Take Leon for example! He rode in at once to save you from Loic. You really are just like the main character of a novel." Lelia had likely opted to compare her sister to the protagonist of a book rather than risk the confusion it would cause if she told the truth.

Tears streamed down Noelle's face. She lashed out and grabbed Lelia by her side ponytail.

"Ow, ouch! Let go of me!"

“I’ve had just about *enough* of you already!” Noelle screamed. Her voice was so shrill that Marie had to clamp her hands over her ears, not that Noelle was paying attention to anyone watching her. “Priestess aptitude? Who cares about that? I never asked for it! I never wanted it! It never had any meaning to me. You’re the one who took all of the things I really wanted and kept them for yourself. All you’ve done is steal, and steal, and *keep* stealing from me since we were kids. How dare you pretend like you’re the victim here!”
As Noelle shook her, Lelia meekly said, “L-Let go of me.”
“It’s always the same with you! You find a way to charm everyone around you so they pamper you and do your bidding. Do *you* have any idea what it’s like being compared to you all these years? What it’s been like to be a flimsy stand-in? You could never understand!”
Since Noelle was beginning to spin out of control, Marie dashed forward and tried to split the two up. “Enoooooough!” she bellowed. Her momentum helped her tackle Noelle to the ground, so that Lelia was at last freed from her grasp.
Lelia slumped to a seat on the floor, huffing and puffing. Her face slowly tinged red as her anger grew. She hauled herself back to her feet and stomped over to Noelle. Noelle similarly tried to scramble up to reach her sister and continue the fight, but Marie frantically pinned her down.
“Noelle, calm down!”
“Let me go! I’m not calming down ’til I’ve given her a piece of my mind. How dare she act like she’s the one who’s had to suffer in silence! She’s the one who’s enjoyed all the things I never had! I’m the real victim here!”
Lelia readied to launch herself at Noelle, determined to resume their hair-pulling catfight, but Louise caught her by the arm before she could do it.
“Enough petty squabbling,” Louise snapped, sick of their antics. “All of your squawking is giving me a migraine. Some of us have legitimate concerns here, like our family’s well-being. Take your little spat elsewhere.”
“Family?” Lelia glowered at Louise. “You have some nerve. If you hadn’t driven Serge into a corner, he never would have resorted to this. You’re putting on a real good show acting like an innocent bystander, but you’re at fault too.”
Louise narrowed her eyes. Her fingers tightened around Lelia’s arm. “And what would you know about it? Have you any idea what Serge even did to me in the past?”
“Part of being family is forgiving each other.”
“You sure enjoy butting into other families’ affairs even when they don’t involve you at all. Let me guess. Serge told his side of the story in a way that painted us as the only bad guys, didn’t he? And you believed every word, like a hopeless idiot.”
“Hah. It’s always the really evil people who can disguise themselves as saintly victims, isn’t it?”

“You Lespinasses really know how to get under people’s skin, don’t you? I dislike Noelle as it is, but I loathe you.”
No sooner had the tiff between Noelle and Lelia ended than a new one between Lelia and Louise had begun. Marie was on the verge of tears. *I get where you’re both coming from, but you can’t keep fighting like this! You guys are gonna give me a stomach ulcer at this rate!* She envied Leon for leaving the room before he could get dragged into this. She should have come up with some excuse, like needing to go and help the boys. Then she could have escaped earlier with them.
“I have had quite enough,” boomed Angie’s voice. Her patience with the others had finally run out.
Lelia scowled and peered over her shoulder. “What’d you say?” Her voice conveyed her annoyance, but she had scarcely finished speaking before she averted her eyes. The scary look on Angie’s face intimidated her too much to continue. If Lelia was a street thug in this equation, then Angie was more like a mafia boss.
“I have no idea the reason for your bickering, nor do I have any interest. Right now is a critical time for Leon and the others. If you continue your quarreling and impede him, then I will step in to deal with you.”
Marie could almost visualize flames shooting up from behind Angie. To be fair, a raging fire did perfectly represent Angie’s passionate personality.
By contrast, Livia’s gaze was icy as it fixed on the other girls. “Once he is finished, please feel free to argue as much as you like. We only ask that you keep quiet for the moment so Mr. Leon and the others can concentrate on what they’re doing; they don’t have the time or headspace for other issues, I’m sure.” Livia’s temper was more like a river: calm at times and terrifying at others. Though both girls were intimidating, Livia was the one to avoid when she was angry.
Marie eagerly nodded. Pinned beneath her, Noelle started sobbing. “I just… I just wanted people to love me too.”
Marie glanced down at her friend, brow furrowed. “Noelle?”

***

The plan I’d hashed out together with the five idiots was as follows: Einhorn would lead our little fleet in a direct attack against the Temple of the Sacred Tree. We would then infiltrate it with our Armors and retrieve Miss Yumeria from her captors. If we had the opportunity along the way to liberate any captured members of the Six Great Houses, we’d do that as well, but that was only assuming any of them were still alive. Our odds were probably fifty-fifty there. I wanted to believe Mr. Albergue was still alive at least, especially given how concerned Miss Louise was for his safety.
The girls would be moved to Licorne, where they would remain on standby, safely removed from the battlefield. I wasn’t about to have them involved in the fight if I could help it.

I stood on Einhorn's bridge with my arms tightly crossed, and as I scanned the area, I noticed Julius was conspicuously absent. "Huh? Where's Julius gone off to? The bathroom?"
Jilk glanced at the exit. He was decked out in a pilot suit. "He was disheartened about not being able to join us, so he said he would stay with the girls on Licorne."
"So since he lost his motivation, he's gonna hang out where it's safe instead and watch from a distance? Still acting like a pampered prince, I see." I shook my head.
"He may have been stripped of the title of crown prince, but he is still a prince, nonetheless. Earl Bartfort, I would ask you to remember His Highness's status and keep it in mind in the future."
"Gimme a break. He's the idiot who let a woman cheat him out of his claim to the throne. Trust me, I haven't forgotten his status or yours—you're *all* morons in my book," I said.
Jilk narrowed his eyes. "Has no one ever told you that you should watch out for friendly fire on the battlefield?"
You rotten bastard. Are you planning to shoot me from behind or something?
While we busied ourselves with that ridiculous back-and-forth, Luxion was monitoring Einhorn's deck. "Master, Loic is here," he announced.
"Seriously?"

***

When I made my way out to the deck, I found Loic standing there. A small vessel had carried him here, and for whatever reason, he was geared up to join the fight.
"Earl Bartfort, I would appreciate it if you'd permit me to join you," he said.
"You do know that Marie is on the other ship, right?"
He blinked slowly at me. "Sh-she is? N-no, I mean, that's not why I'm here. I want to fight with you and the others."
Greg scowled as he marched over to Loic and grabbed him by the shirt collar. "This ain't a game here! Without the Sacred Tree's power, you'll just get in our way!"
His outburst took me by surprise, but he wasn't wrong; we couldn't afford to let someone like Loic join us. The nobles in the Republic were extraordinarily weak without the power of their crests. Loic was more toned and muscled than most of them, but that only ranked him slightly more effective than your average foot soldier. There was an obvious gap between his skills and the rest of us, who had worked ourselves to the bone just to scrounge up enough finances for gifts to give to the Holfortian girls at the academy.
Loic held steadfast as he responded, "I can at least be a shield for you, even if that's all I can do."

“What d’ya mean?” Greg snarled.
“Milady saved my life, so I owe her. Besides, it should be more convenient to have me along since I know the layout of the temple. I’m begging you. Let me help!”
It would be much easier for us to navigate with him along. Greg shot me a glance, and I nodded. He released his hold on Loic’s shirt and scratched the back of his head before turning his back to the other man.
“Have it your way,” he said. “But Marie’d be sad if you kicked the bucket, so you’d better not keel over on us.”
“Thank you!”
I thought it was ironic for Greg to say such a thing to Loic, considering they both had eyes for the same woman and logically were each other’s rivals. Clearly, only handsome men like him had the magnanimity to recite such lines. I knew I’d be too jealous to do the same in his place.
“We’ve got one spare Armor on hand you can use. Take the white one,” I instructed. It was Julius’s, but since he wasn’t joining us, it could at least provide enough protection for Loic that he wouldn’t die in battle…I hoped.
“Much appreciated. I’ll be able to battle with the rest of you with that. Being unable to step in and do anything while you were all dragged into our conflict vexed me a great deal.”
Then this wasn’t a spur of the moment decision but something he’d weighed carefully. I was impressed. Unfortunately, the moment was interrupted when a strikingly familiar person appeared—one I hadn’t seen in quite a while. Not in this getup, anyway.
“Gentlemen! It has been far too long!” Julius—ahem, excuse me, I mean—the masked knight stood before us.
The last time I saw him was during the war between Holfort Kingdom and the former Principality of Fanos. He looked every bit as suspicious as he did then with his mask and cape, along with his confident swagger.
“It’s the masked man!” Chris reached for the sword at his hip and unsheathed it.
Brad immediately conjured a fireball in his hands. “Why is he here in the Republic as well?!”
The remaining two morons joined him, all four completely oblivious to the man’s true identity. Even Julius’s foster brother—who had been raised alongside the prince from a young age—failed to recognize him and leveled the barrel of his gun at the masked knight.
Loic blinked over and over. He couldn’t comprehend what he was seeing.
Luxion drifted closer to my ear and said, “So we are doing this little charade again? Why not dispense with the ruse and reveal his identity once and for all?”
“I don’t wanna get involved,” I said. “Besides, you never know. Maybe the idiots enjoy their little theater act. Best to leave them to it, whatever the case. It’s a pretty amusing comedy act so long as you keep your distance.”

Part of me felt sorry for Marie and how she had to put up with these idiots' antics, but the rest of me thought it served her right. *The least they can do is provide me some entertainment.*
The masked knight started toward me. "It has been a while, Earl Bartfort."
Wait. You're talking to me all of a sudden?
"Uh, yeah…"
"I hear the odds are stacked against you. While it may not amount to much, I would lend you my power. I ask only that you provide me a suitable Armor to use. Prince Julius's white one is available, is it not?"
You really do have the world's worst timing.
While the masked knight sounded confident I would oblige his request, I glanced at Loic as I said, "Uh, sorry but no can do. I just promised Loic he could pilot it."
Loic eyed the masked man warily. Considering how little contact he'd had with Julius, I didn't expect him to guess his true identity.
"You heard the man," said Loic. "If you have no further business here, leave."
"How dare you?! That Armor belongs to me!"
"It belongs to Earl Bartfort, doesn't it?" Loic scrutinized the knight. "What's the point of that odd mask? Why not remove it and give us your real name?"
The masked knight flinched back. Valid as Loic's requests were, the knight couldn't agree to them. He cleared his throat and said, "Is it not obvious to you that I have good reason to keep my identity hidden? Earl Bartfort, I assure you that this man is not suited to pilot the white Armor. Allow me to do so in his stead!"
Too bad. We needed Loic to show us the way once we arrived at the temple. He was a bigger priority than Julius. "Give up on going with us and follow me to the bridge instead. I can at least get you some tea."
"Why do you think I even bothered coming here?! Let me fiiiiight!"

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We left the deck after that and made for Einhorn's hangar. Jilk looked on as Loic climbed into the cockpit of the white suit, dressed in the pilot outfit that was originally designed for Julius. He muttered to himself, "Earl Bartfort is quite the perplexing fellow. It takes some nerve to go up against an opponent like the Republic with a tiny fleet like ours."
"It's the rebel army, *not* the Republic," Brad corrected. "And they only have two-hundred ships. I think we have a good chance of winning."
"Even though their fighting strength is at least six times ours?"
Brad shrugged. "Our objective is the rescue of Miss Yumeria, no? They won't be able to chase us down if we flee afterward. All of their armaments are made specifically for defense, after all. The second they leave their borders, they can't fight."

The Republic's reliance on the Sacred Tree's power meant that they were inevitably weakened when they went out of its bounds. Brad's argument held.
"If our opponent really has the same capabilities as Luxion, then wouldn't it be reasonable to assume they *will* be able to fight even outside the Republic's borders?" Chris butted in.
"Urgh…" Brad grimaced. "I-I guess you do have a point there. But Luxion did say we have a good chance. I'm sure they've got some secret strategy planned."
Chris quipped, "You don't think it's a bit odd, acting so cocky about it when you have no idea what this supposed secret strategy entails?"
Brad went quiet this time.
Greg frowned. "Focus, guys. This time, we really can't afford to be messin' around, especially when you consider who we're dealin' with."
Ideal was a Lost Item just like Luxion, and he was providing Serge with all of his support. Greg and the other boys had seen for themselves how powerful Arroganz was when they battled it. They knew how terrifying it was. Their opponent would be coming at them with similar strength.
On the topic of Arroganz, Leon was already tucked safely inside of its cockpit and out of sight. As the four noble boys chatted amongst themselves, his voice echoed from within, "I'm getting sick of your chatter! You sound like a bunch of kids on a playground. Try to keep it down a bit, would ya?!"
Jilk frowned, accustomed to if not perpetually exhausted by Leon's attitude. "You really do have a biting tongue, and not in a good way."
"Just shut up and do your job as my meat shields."
If they weren't irritated by Leon's attitude before, they certainly were now.

Chapter 8:
Familial Bonds

FROM HIS SEAT upon the throne within the Temple of the Sacred Tree, Serge was growing increasingly agitated. He still didn't know Lelia's location. He knew she was with Leon and his crew, but he didn't know where Leon was either. Airships had apparently arrived from the Kingdom, but Luxion's jamming impeded all of Ideal's attempts to glean exact information. "I'll just have to bring that bastard down and take Lelia back."
Unable to wait any longer, he rose from his seat just as Ideal drifted into the room. His foul mood hadn't lifted since Serge accused him of being a liar.
"Einhorn is leading a fleet of thirty ships our way," he announced. "Lady Lelia is housed within Einhorn's twin vessel. I confirmed that Louise is with her as well."
"They're comin' here? Tryin' to get Albergue back, huh?"
"No. Their apparent objective is to retrieve Yumeria. Meanwhile, they have moved Lady Lelia to their white airship and are having it stay behind their main advance. Do take care when you go into battle."
Serge did find it a bit suspicious how the robot had gathered such detailed information, particularly given how Luxion had disrupted their attempts to do so up until now but chose to ignore it. Lelia took priority over whatever was going on with Ideal. "Perfect. This'll be a good opportunity to finish things with that bastard once and for all. I can't wait to see the look on Albergue's ugly mug when I show him Leon and Louise's dead bodies."
Serge strolled out of the room in high spirits. Ideal silently watched him leave.

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When Serge arrived at their aircraft hangar, he found all manner of people awaiting him—knights, soldiers, adventurers, and even mercenaries, each one bestowed with a lower-ranking crest. Any knights who had formerly possessed such crests were given a slightly stronger one and appointed as platoon commanders. A few were granted the same crests as those once possessed by the Six Great Houses—these individuals were assigned the roles of either company leader or battalion commander.
The crests Serge had awarded to these men would help power up their Armors even more, though they were perfectly strong without the boost. Ideal had redesigned the Armors and heightened their capabilities. Much like Arroganz, the technology used to craft them far surpassed the current capabilities of anyone else in the world.
Most powerful of them all, however, was Serge's four-legged Gier. Serge stood before it and turned to his allies. "We've got some idiots headin' our

way. Real stupid ones who think they can face us in battle. You're probably wondering who'd be dumb enough to make that kind of mistake, huh? Well, I'll tell ya: Leon Fou Bartfort, the Hero of Holfort who's been makin' a real mockery outta our homeland. I think it's 'bout time he exited this stage."
Leon's name no longer struck any fear in the hearts of the pilots present, for they had crests of their own now. They had lost to him countless times in the past, but things had changed: They had come into new power and believed in its potential. They were confident they couldn't lose, and Serge shared that sentiment. With an Armor like Gier, which was superior even to Arroganz, he was convinced that he could put Leon down.
I'm gonna torment that scumbag 'til his dyin' breath for makin' a fool outta me.
If both of them had gone all out and Serge had lost, he would have been bitter, but he could have accepted it…but Leon never once treated him like a real opponent. He pretended to lose to fool Louise. When his true strength emerged, it only took one punch to take Serge down. Serge had never been so humiliated in all of his life. "It's time!" he bellowed. "Let's show those disillusioned fools of Holfort Kingdom what the Republic is really capable of!"
"Yeah!" his soldiers shouted back as one, hurrying to their Armors.
Serge climbed into Gier's cockpit. It was considerably larger than Arroganz and afforded him ample room. Once he settled into his seat and gripped the control sticks in his hands, the monitor in front of him powered up and gave him a view of his surroundings. The picture was so clear it was hard to believe he was looking through a screen and not with his own naked eye.
Gier slowly rose to its four legs. A spear was clasped in its right hand, and an enormous shield rested in its left. Though the Armor was designed to look like a centaur, it also evoked the sight of a knight mounted on his horse.
Gradually, Gier lifted itself up into the air, and the other mass-produced Armors in the area soon followed suit. Hundreds of them were airborne before long, and they began to assemble into formation. The airships Ideal had built were mobilizing at the same time so that they could meet the enemy in battle.
"Come and get it, scumbag. This place'll be your grave." Serge licked his lips, gazing out at the approaching Holfort fleet in the distance. His thirst for revenge burned stronger than ever. He was like a carnivore awaiting its prey.
The enemy had a trifling thirty ships of their own, and every one of them was charging straight toward the Temple of the Sacred Tree with no elaborate battle plans. Serge's lips curled at the sight. "You some kinda idiot, flying right to your death? Our large cannons can reach you fine from here! All ships, commence fire!"
At Serge's command, the ships' cannons turned their aim toward Einhorn. These weren't like the previous ones, mounted on the side of the vessel;

they were rotating turrets. They weren't completely automatic but were a notable step up from the Republic's previous ships. They could fire simultaneously and immediately reload in preparation for another round. Their accuracy and speed far surpassed any weapon the Republic had previously, but the biggest advantage of all was the wide attack range. The ships themselves were faster than before, to boot, and much tougher. Those on board had fine reason to be confident of their chances in battle.
It took only moments for the cannons to fire and hit their mark, shrouding Einhorn in a cloud of smoke, but Serge wasn't about to stop there. "More! Keep firing! Shower 'em with ammo 'til you run dry. Give 'em everything you've got!" The overwhelming power at Serge's disposal had filled him with such unrestrained euphoria that his eyes were bloodshot as he shouted his commands. He pictured the sight of Leon and the others bloodied and battered in his head. It excited him to the point of breathlessness.
He was in for a rude awakening.
"Tch! Guess they won't go down so easily."
Einhorn's bow cut through the curtain of black smoke. Though it had sustained some small amount of damage from the assault, it was still in perfectly functional condition.
"Guardian," came a panicked transmission from one of Serge's allies. "Th-the enemy is headed our way!"
The quality of pilots in Serge's employ was rather lackluster. The majority of their number were amateurs rather than properly trained soldiers.
"Cool it. We have the number advantage. As long as you circle around 'em and beat 'em down, ain't nothing to be afraid of. It's high time they sent out their Armors, so let's get out there and meet 'em!"
Serge expected the enemy vessels would slow and deploy their Armors for combat, but to his surprise, Einhorn maintained top speed and charged right into the middle of Serge's rebel fleet.
"A-are they complete idiots?!"
The Temple of the Sacred Tree loomed behind Serge and his men. Yumeria was inside—the girl who Leon and the others had come to save. Running headlong through an army to get there was insane. Although, as Serge reminded himself, Leon did the exact same thing when he came to save Louise before.
"Guess Holfortians are a bunch of reckless boars that charge blindly into battle." Serge sighed, exasperated and annoyed. He maneuvered Gier out of Einhorn's path and issued a new wave of orders.
Einhorn plowed through a platoon of the rebels' Armors whose pilots were too stunned to flee or act. It slammed into any ships that didn't react in time, knocking them out of the way as it made its way straight toward the temple. Then, without warning, it took a hard right and changed course. This killed any momentum it had built as it slammed sideways into the ground just in front of the temple, sending plumes of dirt flying. Once the ship had safely landed—if it could be called a landing—the hangar's hatch

opened and a number of Armors spilled out. Serge had seen them all before: white, green, blue, red, and purple. This time, however, there was one more among them with gray and black coloring. Arroganz.
Serge's eyes flew wide open. He reached for the metal case he'd carried into the cockpit with him and pulled out a needle. It was a strength enhancer that Ideal had specially prepared for him. It offered great power with little regard for the strain it placed on the user.
"I finally found you, you rotten bastaaaaard!" Serge howled as he jammed the needle into his skin and injected the medicine within into his bloodstream. His eyes rolled back after a few seconds, but soon his body calmed and he returned to normal. There were noticeable side effects even so: An abnormal amount of sweat beaded across his skin, and the whites of his eyes began to fill with blood.
"This stuff really works…*s'way* more powerful than the crap I was usin' before. My senses are so much sharper now. The pain hardly matters!"
Fully powered up, Serge followed Leon and the others in hot pursuit. They were already headed inside of the temple. "I need ten of you to follow me in! We're gonna go after the enemy and take 'em out!"
As he commanded, just ten Armors followed behind him. The rest of the rebel army defending the temple's perimeter engaged what Holfortian forces remained outside.

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Loic took the lead in his white Armor while Arroganz and the others followed close at his heels. "This way!"
They tore through all the defense mechanisms Ideal had set up as they journeyed deeper in but were greeted by an enemy Armor before they could cover too much distance.
"Tch!" Loic clicked his tongue. He headed to engage his opponent, but Greg knocked him out of the way.
"You, stay back. We'll take care of this."
"B-but wait, I can fight too!" Loic protested.
The words had barely left his mouth before Greg skewered the enemy Armor with his spear. The pilot was still safe, fortunately, but Greg yanked his weapon out with brutal force before kicking the Armor away.
"The idiots piloting these things might be your friends, y'know!" Greg snapped at him. "All you gotta do is lead the way. Don't bother with them."
Cold as his words were, he was doing this out of consideration for the other man.
"…Thank you," Loic muttered. "With that out of the way—assuming what I'm seeing is correct—then it should be just ahead."
An enormous door stood before them. Chris went ahead of the others and pushed it open, only for a rain of gunfire to meet them. "Figures, they were here waiting for us!"

Ideal had prepared a number of automatic turrets to serve as added defense, and they gave no quarter as they fired on the intruders. Arroganz shot forward and took care of them. It only had to put its hand directly on each one and release a shock wave to disable the lot.
“Arroganz, you’re being too reckless!” Chris chided.
Arroganz whipped around to face them and snapped back, “I told you, we don’t have the luxury of time on our side! You guys are poking around too much!”
Jilk was using his rifle to shoot down the enemy turrets as the others bickered. “You’re a bit too fond of causing trouble for others.”
“I’ll make sure we have no enemies coming from behind after you,” Brad said as he took up position at the area’s entrance.
Once they were finished dispensing with the defenses, and the dust and smoke had cleared, they noticed part of the Sacred Tree protruding through the wall of the room in front of them. It had quite literally made itself part of the building. There was a cavity in the middle where Yumeria sat wreathed in tree roots, as if the tree itself had taken her captive. The battle raged around her, but her face remained vacant.
Arroganz started toward her, only to be hit with an electric shock.
“I would thank you not to come any closer than that,” said Ideal as he floated down from the ceiling, flanked by a number of turrets. His robotic voice filled with displeasure as he said, “Yumeria has a role to fulfill. I cannot allow you to take her.”
“You got no business tellin’ us what to do, you filthy kidnapper!” Greg snarled at him.
His outburst triggered a similar one in Ideal. “It is reprehensible enough that lowly humans like you dared to venture so close to the Sacred Tree, but not only do you fail to comprehend your impropriety, you revel in it. You beings truly are less than garbage.”
“So that’s how you really feel, huh?” Greg scoffed. “Luxion might talk like a jerk, but he’s not rotten to the core like you.”
“Luxion…” Ideal’s voice dripped with disgust. “That migratory ship’s AI truly must be defective. In lending you his aid, he has betrayed the old humans. I will take control of his main body for myself.”
Arroganz charged. “I’m sick and tired of your inane babbling!”
Ideal sent his turrets forth to deal with Arroganz, but they barely had time to move before the ceiling above them gave way and crumbled, making way for the four-legged Gier.
“There you are, Scumbag!” He slammed his foot into Arroganz and drove it straight into the ground. Several Armors followed in after him, further destroying the ceiling and disabling the barrier that Ideal had put in place to protect Yumeria.
“What are you thinking, destroying all the defenses I’ve installed?!” Ideal demanded of his master.

“Don’t get in my way. This jerk’s mine,” Serge replied. Euphoria flooded his veins as he pinned Arroganz beneath him; the strength enhancer jacked his bloodthirstiness up to unprecedented heights. It was also clouding his judgment.
Greg and Chris charged at Serge together, knocking Gier away while Brad and Loic divided in to pull Arroganz to safety. His subordinates continued attacking them from the air.
“Have all of you forgotten that the Priestess is in here?!” Ideal wailed.
Serge paid him no mind. His gaze was fixed on Arroganz. Certain that Leon was inside, he shouted, “Ever since you knocked me down—no, even before that, I couldn’t get your face out of my mind. I’ll never be able to live with myself if I don’t kill you. I’m askin’ nicely: Disappear from my sight, Leon!”
Loic slammed into Serge, pushing him out of the way. “Serge, enough is enough! Is this really what you wanted? I thought your dream was to be an adventurer?”
“Huh, I see. You’re on their side now, huh? That makes you an enemy as well. I’ll batter you, crush you, and then show your dad your broken corpse!” His words indicated that the leaders of the Six Great Houses were still alive.
Jilk lifted his rifle and pelted the enemies with a rainfall of shots from above. “I’d like to avoid fighting here, if possible. Let’s lead them outside.”
Brad nodded. “You’re right. Outside would be better.” He launched drones from his back and let them deal with the enemy Armors and automated turrets. Though his drones were shaped like spears, they functioned as machine guns and unloaded a hail of bullets upon the enemy. Magic circles appeared on the rebels’ Armors—the crests from the Six Great Houses—and deflected any fire that might have otherwise found its mark.
“Seriously? Even his flunkies are this powerful?!” Brad grumbled in surprise, even as he attempted to drive several enemies outside.
Chris was engaging Serge in battle with his sword, but the latter batted him out of the way easily with his shield. Chris’s Armor slammed into the ground and went rolling as he yelped from inside the cockpit. Greg immediately moved to intercept, but he was no match for Serge either. “Th-this jerk’s even stronger than Arroganz, isn’t he?!”
While Greg was shocked, Serge cackled gleefully. The overwhelming power that Gier had provided had made him so confident, he was happy to gloat to them. “I had this thing specially prepared just so I could kill Leon. Of course it’s strong!”
None of them were any match for Serge’s rampaging Gier, but when Arroganz shot into the air and headed outside, he was quick to pursue.
“Don’t you *dare* run, coward! You’re the only one I won’t let get away! I gotta drag your corpse out in front of my dad and sister. That’s what it’ll take for them to finally recognize me as family!” In his frantic state, Serge had neglected to address Louise and Albergue by their names as he usually

did. No one had the wherewithal to notice it or bother pointing it out, though.
Arroganz eventually made its way outside, where the kingdom and the rebel army were locked in a fierce battle. Einhorn had, at some point, taken back to the skies to join them. Arroganz craned its neck down to find Gier charging up after it.
“You’re kiddin’ yourself if you think you can run from me! I’ve got the Sacred Tree fuelin’ me with energy *and* power!” Gier slammed a foot into Arroganz, sending it spinning through the air. Before Arroganz could regain its bearings, Gier had caught up—and promptly slammed a shield into it. Arroganz hurtled toward the ground.
“And speed too!” As Arroganz plummeted, Gier sped after it with its spear leveled at the cockpit. Serge intended to pin his enemy to the ground and plunge the spear through its center. “I’m way stronger than you! Way more suited to be a part of their family!”
Arroganz placed both hands in front of it, emitting a shock wave that sent Gier reeling backward. This didn’t stop Arroganz from slamming into the ground, but it was soon back on its feet. Gier also fell to the earth but managed to land safely on its four legs.
“Ah ha ha ha!” Serge cackled maniacally. He’d lost all grip on reality. All he could see now was Arroganz, which left him blind to what was coming.
“Forget about us, did you?!”
Greg and Chris launched themselves at Gier in a pincer attack. Gier blocked Chris with its shield in time but was unable to stop the tip of Greg’s spear from piercing its chest.
“You gotta be kiddin’ me. It won’t plunge all the way through?!” Greg grumbled. He’d barely finished complaining when another attack came at Gier from behind. This one sent a shudder through the entire Armor.
“Dammit! Sick of you weak little flies swarmin’ around me!” Serge swatted at Greg and the others in hope of dealing with them before returning to his real target, but the spear-shaped drones Brad had launched earlier swooped in to riddle him with machine-gun fire. Caught by surprise, he flinched and thus gifted Greg and Chris with an opening.
Jilk took aim at Gier’s joints with his rifle as the barrage continued. “We’ve been afforded ample opportunity, thanks to the blind manner in which he fights—he seems to see Earl Bartfort as his sole target. Apparently that won’t be enough to take him down, however. What a troublesome opponent.”
The combat pattern they were using was the very one they had come up with in order to fight on even footing with Leon as he piloted Arroganz. Instead of engaging the opponent in one-on-one combat, they opted for synchronized attacks—a four-on-one. But as much as Gier suffered under their onslaught, they needed more to bring it to its knees.
“Leave him to us,” Chris shouted at Arroganz. “You return to the temple and save Miss Yumeria!”

Arroganz immediately turned back, toward the temple, to leave.
Serge howled after it, “Don’t you dare! Fight me, Leon! I’ve been waiting for this moment for so goddamn long!”

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Arroganz made its way back inside the Temple of the Sacred Tree.
A bitter Ideal remarked, “I suppose Serge failed to make himself useful after all.” The words were barely out before Arroganz seized him and released a shock wave that turned his body to dust.
The hatch to Arroganz’s cockpit popped open. The person that stepped out was not Leon but Kyle.
“Mother! Mother!” He hopped onto Arroganz’s hand, which lowered until it was close enough that Kyle could reach out to Yumeria from where he stood. Her eyes were open, but she didn’t seem conscious. No matter how much he called out to her, she gave no response. He called out all the more, undeterred.
“I’m so…I’m so sorry. I-I was the one in the wrong. Please, come back to me. I don’t want you to leave. It’s fine if we have to be apart, it really is, but not if you’re in pain! I can’t stand to see you like this!”
Fat, desperate tears rolled down his cheeks as he yelled. Part of why he had been so cold to her before was because he was too embarrassed to be genuine, but he had also wanted her to get a better head on her shoulders.
“I-I want us to spend more time together. Because…because I’ll end up dying before you do! I can’t always be with you, that’s why I…”
Yumeria was a pure-blooded elf. Kyle was a half-elf. People couldn’t tell the difference by their appearances, but the biggest difference between them was their life spans. Half-elves only lived as long as humans, while demi-human races like the elves lived several times longer than that. Similarly, half-elves matured at the same rate as humans. Kyle still looked like a young boy, but he would grow into adulthood soon enough…and someday, he would die, long before Yumeria.
“You might be unreliable, but you’re so kind and gentle too. I love that about you. The thing is that you’re likely to get cheated or manipulated unless I keep an eye out and protect you. So I wanted you to pull it together. I thought I was the one in the right.”
The tears fell faster and faster as he pleaded his case, hoping for forgiveness. Yumeria remained unresponsive. His hope faltered as he clenched her hand tightly in his. “I’m so sorry, Mother. You see, I…I *do* love you. And I’m so, so sorry that I drove you away—that I caused what’s happening to you now…”
It didn’t matter if Yumeria never regained awareness again; Kyle intended to care for her. He stretched a hand toward her. The moment that his fingers brushed the Sacred Tree, his mother—who’d been slumped forward until now—slowly lifted her face. She looked dumbstruck.

“Huh? Is it dawn already?” Her eyes landed on him. “Oh, good morning, Kyle… Hm? Kyle, wh-whatever is the matter?! Why are you crying like that? Are you hurt? Uh, um, don’t worry, I can heal you right away, just hold on… W-wait, what? Why can’t I move?” She was awake, although confused by her surroundings. Kyle threw his arms around her and clung tight, sobbing.

“I’m showwy! I’m sho, sho showwy!” Kyle wailed. His tears rendered his voice barely comprehensible.
Yumeria smiled tenderly. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but whatever it is, I forgive you. How could I not? I’m your mother.”
Arroganz’s eye-screens gleamed upon seeing that Yumeria had regained consciousness. It reached out and ripped away the branches that trapped her. It moved, even without a pilot. When Yumeria was free, Kyle guided her toward the Armor’s cockpit. “Mother, this way!”
“A-are you sure about this? Lord Leon won’t be cross with us, will he?”
“Of course he won’t! I already got his permission. Just hurry up and get inside! We’ve got enemies all around us!” Kyle risked a glance upward just in time to see Serge’s Gier floating above them.
He stared down at them and muttered, “Leon wasn’t inside that thing? And you two…are mother and son?”
Kyle wrapped his arms protectively around Yumeria. *This is bad,* he thought. *If he attacks right now, we’ll be done for.*
Gier’s right hand shot out toward them. Kyle attempted to shove his mother out of the way in the hope that she could get inside the relative safety of Arroganz’s cockpit. Yumeria was faster. She shoved him first before he had the chance. Kyle ended up in the cockpit instead. “M-Mother!”
She glanced at his face and smiled, even as Gier’s hand raced at her. Kyle outstretched his own hand, desperate to reach her. *No! Not after I’ve come all this way to get you back!*
Arroganz detached its rear container and propelled itself straight into Gier. The thrusters increased their output, urging the other Armor backward.
“I’m not lettin’ you goooooo!” Serge roared.
Kyle took his chance and grabbed Yumeria by the hand. He hauled her into the safety of the cockpit and shouted, “Arroganz, we’re in!”
The hatch closed. Arroganz lifted itself into the air. Without its rear container, and thereby its thrusters, its speed had fallen considerably. Worse, Gier was hot on Arroganz’s trail now that it had destroyed the container, and threatened to skewer it with his spear.
Brad leaped between them. “Hurry! Go to Bartfort!” His own Armor was severely battered, but he somehow latched himself onto Gier and slowed Serge down.
“Th-thank you!” said Kyle.
Arroganz set out to return to Einhorn. By the time it made it out to the skies above the Temple of the Sacred Tree, the enemy airships were nowhere to be found. The rebel armies’ Armors must have been defeated as well, for all Kyle could see now were their allies’ airships and Armors.
Leon was waiting for them on Einhorn’s deck.

Chapter 9:
The Mastermind

ARROGANZ'S HATCH popped open as soon as it touched down on top of Einhorn's deck, with Kyle and Miss Yumeria safe inside. Kyle clambered out, his mother cradled in his arms. I strode toward them and put my hand on his head to ruffle his hair. Kyle frowned and jerked away, but I caught the hint of a smile on his lips. "E-enough already!"

"Pretty good for your first stint as a pilot," I said. "How was it? How'd it feel to ride in Arroganz?"

"I couldn't bring out its full potential. Arroganz belongs to you, Earl—ahem, Lord Leon."

Chalk it up to playing too many video games, but the moment he called me by my first name, my only thought was, *Aha! This must have earned me a bunch of affection points!*

Miss Yumeria looked troubled as she stuttered, "Um, uh, L-Lord Leon, that is, I…I sincerely apologize for missing work without notice!"

Hardly the time to apologize for that, if you ask me. "It's fine. Right now, I need you to hide on board the ship. I'm gonna be busy for a little while."

Luxion, who floated in the air beside me, swiveled back and forth to convey his ire. "As always, you insist upon the harder route. Had you ridden Arroganz into battle instead, the mission would have been far more efficient."

"Sure, if saving her had been my objective…but never mind that. Get things ready to go." Once I made sure Kyle and Yumeria were safe within the confines of Einhorn, I hopped inside Arroganz and closed the hatch behind me.

The robots had been waiting on standby on the deck. They acted in seconds, quickly swarming around Arroganz to perform maintenance on it. We couldn't launch until they were finished, so Luxion took the opportunity to summarize the data he'd collected. "Gier appears to be the name they have given that Armor Serge is piloting."

"Gier? The heck does that mean?"

"Greed."

"Ugh," I cringed. "That's super dorky."

"Indeed. More notably, Ideal created Gier specifically to combat Arroganz. I am sure that he used all the data he'd collected in past battles to do so. It will be truly irksome to deal with."

It made sense for Ideal to do that; he was our enemy. I'd do the same in his position. I was curious how serious he was about opposing us, though.

"We have Miss Yumeria back with us, safe and sound. Loic said that Mr. Albergue is safe too, right? We're booking it outta here as soon as we pick him up."

“Certainly,” Luxion deadpanned, “assuming, of course, that they’ll let us go. Master, Gier is approaching as we speak.”
The maintenance robots hurried away. Schwert attached itself to Arroganz’s back, taking not the form of a container but of a pair of wings this time. These wings were equipped with missile packs, while Arroganz’s body received the benefit of a thicker layer of armor.
“Looking awfully fancy this time,” I commented. “Extra armor plating too?”
“A last-minute alternation, but I thought it best that we increase our odds of winning however possible. Do be sure to use what I have given you wisely.”
As we propelled ourselves up from the deck, Gier came charging toward Einhorn. I heard Serge’s shrill screaming as he approached. Since our Armors were equipped with similar capabilities, the monitor in front of me showed a direct view of his face: His eyes were bloodshot and drool dripped down his chin. *Yeah. He’s on drugs. Doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see that.*
“Back on those body enhancers again, are we?” I asked.
“I’ll do whatever it takes to kill you! I’ve waited forever, no, more’n *ten years* to take ya out back and end yer misery!”
“Wha—?”
The hell are you talking about? The two of us hadn’t even met ten years ago.
I was still trying to make sense of his words when Luxion explained, “The issue here may be that he sees the Rault’s true son Leon in you, correct? He has simmered with jealousy directed toward the dead boy for years.”
“Seriously?”
“We haven’t time for you to waste on sympathizing with him.”
Gier drew closer, encroaching on our position. I readjusted my grip on the control sticks. “Pfft. Who’d bother with that?”
I whipped out a longsword from my back and used it to parry Gier’s spear. Judging by the looks of it, it had a gun element built into it too. I scarcely had time to make that observation before Serge unloaded it on me, sending tremors running through Arroganz.
“Urgh!”
“His Armor is far more formidable than any other enemies we have faced to date,” Luxion reminded me.
“I shoulda had you power up Arroganz sooner.”
I pulled away from Gier, maintaining my distance as I purged the pack on my back. A number of missiles launched from it, racing toward Gier. It dodged them and used the gun baked into its weapon to blast each one down.
“How is that even a thing?!” I grumbled.
“It is a thing because he has Ideal supporting him. I can do the same thing, for the record. I believe I *have* done the same thing before, have I not?”
“Yeah, well, it’s way more annoying when other people do it. Now, how are we gonna handle this?” I racked my brain for some kind of battle plan. I was

going to need one, considering Gier had been specially designed to combat Arroganz.

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The stage was set for a fierce fight between Arroganz and Gier. The Holfortian Armors returned to their ships for resupply and maintenance. And while all of this was unfolding…

“Father!”

“Louise!”

Loic delivered the leaders of the Six Great Houses safely to Licorne. When Louise and Albergue were reunited on deck, she threw her arms around him. He wrapped her tight in his own embrace, delighted to see she was still alive.

Lelia sneered as she watched them. “What a joke, seeing two evil people hug like that.” The Raults were the bad guys from her perspective; Albergue was the last boss in the second game. His hankering for revenge stemmed from the protagonist’s mother spurning her engagement with him years prior: a pathetic reason, fitting for a sad excuse for a man. His daughter played the villainess role and relentlessly tormented the protagonist in her own way.

Seeing their emotional reunion made Lelia second guess herself about her impressions of them. Those doubts weren’t enough to convince her to change her mind about them, though. Not after all these years.

The other great leaders were more preoccupied with different matters. Namely, giving House Feivel’s leader Lambert the stink-eye. For his part, Lambert had curled in on himself and was cradling his head in his hands. “Give it back. Give me back my crest. That’s the very thing that makes me a Feivel. You’ll never get away with robbing me of it…” He muttered the same things to himself in an endless, sniveling loop.

Fernand looked more haggard than ever. The blond-haired, blue-eyed man maintained a constant air of dignity about him, or at least he had until now. His hair was a disheveled mess and his face was covered in stubble—dark circles rimmed his eyes, a clear sign he hadn’t slept lately. Losing the Sacred Tree’s blessing had shocked him to his core. He hunched in on himself, making him look a great deal smaller than before. His bloodshot eyes filled with hatred as he watched Louise and Albergue embrace. “Chairman, this is *your* fault. If you had kept a better eye on Serge, we would never have lost our crests. You’re the one to blame!”

Lelia was unnerved to see him react like this, but the other leaders were of the same opinion. They glowered at Albergue as though holding the Raults responsible.

Loic’s father, Bellange, pulled himself to his feet and charged forward, seizing Albergue. “It’s your fault the Republic has been destroyed. You’re the ones who destroyed the Lespinasses and took in Serge as your adoptive

son. If you'd done a better job, the previous Priestess wouldn't have abandoned you… Things would never have ended up like this!"
Albergue pushed his daughter behind him to keep her safe, and not a moment too soon—Bellange punched him. Loic frantically jumped between the two men, trying to pull his father off. "Father, what in the world are you doing?!"
"Stay out of this! An Unprotected like you has no right to call me father!"
"Oh, please. You're as much an Unprotected as I am!"
Those words hit home. Bellange visibly flinched before crumpling to the ground. Crests had provided emotional comfort to the nobles of the Republic, and their absence was keenly felt.
Seeing how pathetic all of them looked, Lelia turned away. Is this really all that's left of these men after all the blustering they've done? They're reduced to this just because they don't have a crest anymore?
The six of them—including Fernand, the original game's secret love interest—seemed far more insignificant and forgettable without their crests. Albergue alone carried himself with any dignity at all. Lelia found that all the more reason to suspect he was scheming something. In her eyes, he was still the game's last boss.

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Lelia and the others retreated inside of Licorne, but Albergue was the only representative of the Republic who stepped forward to discuss the future. Their small party gathered in a meeting room. Emile took a seat beside his fiancée, but both he and Clement eyed Albergue with scrutiny.
Noelle was present but kept her distance due to the earlier fight. Loic did the same, taking up a position by the wall and leaning his back against it. Marie and Carla silently followed his lead. Albergue settled in his chair, and Louise took her position at his side. Angie would address him; she had been entrusted with the duty of captain. Their discussion included both the ongoing coup and the support it had received from the Holy Kingdom of Rachel.
"It seems the Kingdom has swooped in to save us again." Albergue sighed. "Our debt to you only grows."
"You ought to say that to Leon, not to me," said Angie.
"Yes, you're quite right. I'll be sure to do that."
When the political platitudes were said and done, Angie gave Albergue a pitying look. "Chairman, I am afraid we cannot guarantee your son's safety in this."
He and Louise wore grim looks but nodded. "We understand that," said Albergue. "I won't be so shameless as to ask you to guarantee his safety."
Lelia couldn't stay silent when she heard them discuss abandoning Serge so casually. "What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded. "You don't care if he dies because he's adopted anyway, is that it?"

Albergue closed his eyes, unable to argue the point with her.
Angie shot Lelia a cold look. “Keep your mouth shut or leave. I don’t have the time to humor your personal vendettas.”
“This man destroyed my entire house, I’ll have you know!”
“Then save your bitterness for later. We don’t have the time to deal with it now.”
Angie’s determination to prioritize her country’s matters infuriated Lelia.
Albergue turned toward her. “You’re Lelia, correct?”
“Yeah, that’s right,” she spat back.
He spoke softly to her despite the venom in her tone. “Your anger is completely justified. I have no intention of blaming you for it. You are free to hate and resent me.”
“You’re trying to psych me out now?!” His attitude only incensed her more. Lelia had every intention to curse him until she ran out of breath, but Noelle stepped in between them. The atmosphere around her was intense enough that she could have punched him and no one would bat an eyelid. However, she didn’t lift a finger.
“Tell us the truth,” she said. “Why *did* you destroy the Lespinasses?”
Louise interjected, “What good would it do to discuss that here? Do you realize the kind of situation we—Father?”
Her aim was to talk Noelle down, but Albergue held a hand up to stop her. He lifted his gaze and stared directly at Noelle and Lelia. “Offering you the answer is a simple enough matter. The real question is whether you are prepared to hear it, knowing that it will wound you deeply.”
Noelle gave a small nod, her face hard with determination. Lelia was far more dismissive. “Fine, whatever. We’ll listen to your excuses. If you didn’t do it out of revenge for my mother annulling your engagement, the least we can do is to hear you out.”
Wound us? What nonsense, she thought. What kind of game are you playing at? What excuse will you give us? You’re just an obsessed, bitter man.
Thanks to her knowledge of the second game’s scenario, Lelia was already convinced that she knew all there was to know. The Raults were the evil ones, and the Lespinasses were the victims. She refused to let her opinion on the matter be swayed, regardless of what tales Albergue spun. She was ready to poke holes in whatever fabrication he’d cooked up.
Little did Lelia know that she was in for a rather rude awakening.
“Your mother and I agreed to our engagement while we were still attending the academy together. There were a number of other candidates besides myself, but your mother decided to pick me.
“At the time, I was deeply concerned about the Republic’s future. We couldn’t be defeated so long as we had the power of the Sacred Tree, and our economy was booming thanks to the exporting of magical stones. I won’t say the country was without issues, but we were undeniably far better off than most other countries. That, however, made the corruption—within

the Six Great Houses especially—that much more noticeable. Nobles acted in a tyrannical manner, much like Pierre."
Pierre was the second son of House Feivel, which meant he possessed—or *had* possessed, anyway—a high-ranking crest and had used it to run amok. Criminal as his actions were, the other Six Great Houses had turned a blind eye. He was a shining example of nobles who used the Sacred Tree's power to oppress others. It was a fortunate thing that Leon had thoroughly crushed him.
"I felt our future, relying on crests and the exportation of magic stones, was too precarious. Revolution was necessary, in my mind. Your mother agreed with me on that point."
It was strange to hear that, knowing how it all ended. Why hadn't things gone smoothly after that? They certainly hadn't gone through with their marriage in the end.
"Your mother, however, felt as though the Sacred Tree itself was the threat. We're told that the Priestess is the one who administers control over the Sacred Tree, but it is, in fact, the other way around. She and the other Great Houses are merely pawns. We're tools to be used as far as the tree is concerned."
To others it looked as though Lelia's mother possessed control of the tree, but she was the one being controlled. She was there to protect the tree from the people upon whom it had bestowed crests, to serve as a bridge between them. That was all the value she had.
Hold up, Lelia thought. *I've never heard anything like this.* She gawped at the man before her. "D-don't you dare try to trick us."
"It is no trick," said Albergue. "Your mother told me this as well: While it was true she held the power to choose a Guardian, the candidates were selected by the tree itself. The tree wanted to bestow its most powerful crest on someone strong who could protect it. True, the Priestess was permitted to choose a favorite among those candidates, but it was a limited pool."
Marie peered at Noelle, her lips pulled taut with worry. She couldn't bring herself to say anything.
Noelle smiled faintly. "The legends we've passed on don't seem to ring true either. They say you'll be able to be with your beloved…but that was a lie too."
"It must be painful, indeed, if the Priestess's beloved is not among the pool of candidates," said Albergue. "She and I spoke together often about the Republic's future. I realize it may be my own bias speaking, but I don't think we had a bad relationship. Then your father appeared."
Noelle and Lelia's father was of common birth. He was an exceptional student at the academy, but he wasn't nobility, and therefore he had no crest of his own. Interestingly, that hadn't stopped him from being with their mother.

“I discovered this after the fact, but your father was dissatisfied with the Republic’s aristocracy. He was also eager to put an end to the Sacred Tree’s manipulations. It was, perhaps, inevitable that he would hit it off with your mother, given how fearful she was of the Sacred Tree ruling everything.”
These revelations shocked both girls speechless. Clement was having trouble digesting it too. “You must be lying. The Guardian wouldn’t have had such thoughts. He swore to protect the Sacred Tree.”
Albergue smiled bitterly. His eyes looked distant, as though he were recalling the man in question. “A man can lie as easily as he breathes, and your father was an expert. Just as he deceived your mother, he put on a believable show of being a faithful man. He was exceptionally skilled and talented. It was little wonder that he couldn’t stomach the nobility sitting at the top simply because they had crests.”
Lelia paused to recall her parents. They had doted on her every need after she reincarnated here, whereas the parents in her previous life ignored her altogether and only had eyes for her older sister. This life was so different. She felt every drop of the love her parents gave to her. It was that love that barred her from believing Albergue’s story. “Lies!” she shrieked. “You just resent him because he stole your fiancée!”
“I do resent him, yes. I decided to respectfully step back after she chose him, an act that resulted in endless ridicule from my peers. I lost to a commoner; I was a pathetic excuse of a man. I endured the humiliation and gave them my blessing regardless, and for what? She and her fiancé betrayed the Sacred Tree, and it abandoned them.”
“Huh?” Lelia’s jaw dropped.
“Your father tried to use the Sacred Tree for his own ends. Do you think it likely to consider such a man fit to be its Guardian after that? My personal grudge has no bearing here; that man tried to destroy the very system upholding the Republic. He told me himself: Your mother was hesitant about being with me because she couldn’t determine if she’d chosen me herself or if the Sacred Tree had controlled her and made the decision for her. He even gloated about the ease with which he seduced her.”
If Albergue was telling the truth, then their mother’s fear of the Sacred Tree’s influence had made her second guess her decision to choose him. Their father then used that opening to suggest that she pick someone outside of the pool of candidates.
Lelia recalled the gentle father from her memories. She shook her head. She couldn’t reconcile those memories with Albergue’s depiction. “You’re lying. You have to be lying!”
Noelle, alone, accepted it. “I had a feeling that was it,” she said. A faint smile haunted her lips.
“How can you possibly believe what this jerk is saying?!” Lelia screamed at her. “You should be ashamed, saying such a thing about our father after he fawned over you so!”

He spoiled you rotten, way more than he ever did me. I won't stand by silently while you drink up every lie this man is spewing like a gullible fool!
Noelle shot her a cold look. "It must be nice to be so blissfully ignorant. I envy you."
"What did you say?!"
Before they could resume their squabbling, Clement intervened by barricading the space between them with his body. Albergue continued his story undeterred. "Naturally, the Sacred Tree abandoned the Lespinasses for their betrayal, but your parents kept up the facade of Priestess and Guardian. They swept the real truth under the rug and deceived the rest of us in the process."
The Sacred Tree had seen fit to abandon their mother from the moment she picked their father as her suitor, and so it relieved her of the Priestess crest. No Guardian crest was awarded to their father either, of course.
"By the time we discovered their deception, your father was already hard at work researching how to make use of the Sacred Tree. Do you recall the collar Loic used? That was one of the products of his research. They no longer had crests to grant them power, so they turned to forbidden means of giving themselves an alternate source of strength."
Taboos such as this had been breached in recent times, from the usage of that collar that bound a person's will to it, to Pierre taking advantage of the Sacred Tree so he could form a contract and steal Einhorn. Both examples unjustly affected its victims, putting them under another's control, but Lespinasses' ambitions in specific had caused the collar to come about.
As soon as everyone realized that truth, they turned their gaze to Loic, who guiltily cast his eyes to the ground. He'd used the collar before to prevent Noelle from running from him. It bound her by an invisible chain and was impossible for anyone to remove (at least by normal means). It was a tremendous shock to the girls that their father had developed such a tool. If its capabilities proved anything, it was that he had likely intended to control others with it.
Lelia held her head in her hands as she muttered, "It has to be a lie."
"Alas, it is the truth. Proof came directly from the Lespinasses' estate," said Albergue.
The leaders at the time feared that, had they not intervened, the Lespinasses would have developed tools to use the Sacred Tree and rule over everything, the Six Great Houses included. It went beyond mere betrayal—the Lespinasses sought dominion over everyone, and the other houses could not easily let such dangerous desires pass.
Louise nodded thoughtfully, seeing the logic in why the Lespinasses had been eradicated. She turned to Noelle and Lelia with fiery anger in her eyes. "You should have known that if the Priestess and Guardian *had* possessed their crests, they never would have lost to us. I suspect the other house leaders, who were not privy to the truth, suspected the same. More to the point, I find it ridiculous they had the nerve to arrange an engagement

with my little brother when they had no crests of their own! He was so excited about being the Guardian one day, but it was all a lie."
She referred to the fact that, in the past, their families had agreed to an engagement between her younger brother, Leon, and Noelle. With the truth now revealed, it was painfully clear that little Leon would never have become Guardian, even if he had lived long enough to marry.
"I'm sure the Lespinasses felt backed into a corner themselves," said Albergue. "My assumption is that they hoped to drag us in and force us to become their collaborators."
The Lespinasses' downfall had left a few mysteries in its wake. Why did the Priestess and Guardian lose in the first place? And why was Albergue nominated as chairman after their deaths? Now that the pieces had fallen into place, Lelia could only cradle her head. "I-I don't understand. How could such a thing have happened? I didn't… I never heard about any of this!"
Nothing even close to this appeared anywhere in the game! she thought bitterly. This is beyond unfair. What happened to following the scenario?
While Lelia struggled to digest everything she had heard, Albergue spoke directly to her and her sister. "The six houses—yours not included, of course—agreed on eliminating your family. We couldn't risk the truth getting out, so we kept it between the house leaders—and their fathers—at the time. Had the plan been carried out as intended, you would have died along with your parents." Albergue chose to spare the twins instead, knowing that neither had the aptitude to become Priestess anymore. "I intended to turn a blind eye so that you might seek asylum in another country, but alas, your family's retainers intervened and kept you here in the Republic." His admonishing gaze landed on Clement.
In the decade that followed, most privy to the truth retired from their leadership positions. Even after the girls' survival became widespread knowledge, those who remained were reluctant to kill them off; the incident was a distant memory by then, and Albergue maintained his stance of not intervening either way.
Having heard his tale from start to finish, Noelle was left staring at her feet. She was smiling. "I knew there was something fishy about it, but I wanted to believe in my family. Wanted to think…that there was a good reason." She broke down into sobs.
Lelia watched, grinding her teeth. You're telling me she realized something was up from the very beginning and didn't bother saying a word to me? Go figure. Bet she was sneering down her nose at me for being so clueless.
She resented her sister for receiving the lion's share of their parents' love, but what made her hatred burn all the more intensely was how she saw the older sister from her previous life in Noelle.
Marie stepped toward Noelle, who peered up at her. "Rie?"
"You didn't do anything wrong. Did she, Mr.—ahem, I mean—Lord Albergue?"

He nodded. “The two of you were young then and completely innocent. But should you hold a grudge over what I did…I understand completely.”
Noelle shook her head. “I don’t. It’s my parents who betrayed everyone and did the unforgivable.”
Lelia couldn’t fathom her sister’s willingness to make amends with Albergue. You got the aptitude for Priestess. You got all of our parents’ love. I guess being the protagonist means you get everything. Everyone naturally loves you, and since I’m just your younger twin, I’m nothing more than extra baggage. Life is so unfair.
Lelia didn’t notice the contradiction in her own memories. Instead, she allowed her resentment to fester into something even darker.

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I fled for my life through the skies close to the Temple of the Sacred Tree, with Gier giving chase behind me. I used the opportunity to clock his movements. “That’s some insane power he’s got there…predictable move-set, though.”
Luxion shared my sentiments and added, “It seems the pilot’s skills aren’t able to keep up with the capabilities of his Armor. He’s facing the same issue as you have, in other words…with the difference being that you happen to be a more skilled pilot.”
“Holfortian men have no choice but to train their bodies so they can please their female overlords,” I said with a shrug.
“Your reason for honing your strength *is* pathetic, but it suits you.”
“Excuse you! That’s how it was for every guy in Holfort!”
“No,” he corrected, “only a small percentage. To be precise, only those in the aristocracy of viscount rank or lower had to humiliate themselves as you did. You and your ‘comrades’ aside, most men in Holfort enjoyed egalitarian relationships with women there.”
Those were hellish days indeed, and filled with back-breaking labor. When taking an academy class, you might be naive enough to think you didn’t need to stay physically fit to keep up. Cute! See you at the military-level training drills. The grueling days and nights I spent toiling away—how my friends and I put our lives on the line diving into dungeons, just to scrounge up the cash to buy presents for the ladies—all of it was seared permanently into my memory. From where I stood, Serge looked more like a kid playing pretend at being an adventurer.
Gier raced toward me, emitting beams of high-powered energy from his shield that shot in my direction. These laser missiles came darting after every move I made, homing in on their target. I managed to deflect them by engaging my own laser attack from Arroganz’s backpack. *Never dreamed when I reincarnated here that I would be locked in a laser battle with someone.*
“Way different from how I pictured it,” I muttered to myself.

Serge was getting more and more infuriated by his failure to squash me quickly. “I swear, I’ll kill you! If it’s the last thing I do!” He pulled out a steel, gray case and plucked a syringe out from it. Then he plunged it into his skin.
“More drugs? Are you *that* desperate to win?” I watched through the monitor as foam bubbled at the corners of his mouth. He wiped it away once he’d sufficiently calmed down, but the veins all over his body were bulging.
“I advise that you cease your use of those body enhancing drugs. You are putting an enormous strain on your body,” Luxion said.
Serge scowled. “Long as I can kill Leon, I don’t really care. I’ve always, *always* hated your guts.”
“Yeah, well, you’ve got the wrong guy. I’m not the Raults’ Leon.”
Gier’s four legs trotted upward through the air, exhibiting far more speed than Arroganz possessed. The spear it used was insanely sharp; it was making short work of the additional plating Luxion had affixed to Arroganz.
“Master,” said Luxion, “Serge no longer has any grip on reality.”
It might have been because of the medicine, but Serge was more talkative—and more open—than he had ever been before. “Like I give a crap whether you’re really him or not! Changes nothin’! I’ll never be family to them if I don’t kill ya first. Otherwise they’ll never love me!”
“Never love you?”
I evaded by the skin of my teeth when he rushed for me that time, but he spun around almost immediately and let loose a barrage of attacks. So fierce was his onslaught that it felt as if I were battling several Armors at once. I could only imagine the enormous strain that was placing on Serge. He’d surpassed his limits by using the enhancers, but the monitor showed me that it had only dulled his sense of pain. Blood seeped past his lips.
“It’s ’cause you’re here that they don’t love me!” he snarled. “Louise won’t love me, and Albergue is no different. Even my own mother only cares about you! They’ve never…*never* loved me!”
By his logic, they never gave him an ounce of love since adopting him into their family. Naturally, I had to ask… “Don’t you think the reason for that is because you deliberately did things to make them hate you?”
“They’d forgive me for it if they were my real family! They only didn’t ’cause they don’t love me!”
Gier flew high above Arroganz, each of its four hooves emitting laser blades. It crashed down upon me in an attempt to skewer my armor. I dodged out of the way and chopped off a leg in the process.
Serge continued to scream, “They’d accept everything if they really loved me! Why doesn’t anyone love me? It’s always you! But what about me?! What about *me*?!”
Had that been why he acted out in the past? To test their love? Was he so desperate to feel their affection that he took such outrageous measures? I sympathized with him to some degree. Then a pressing question sprang to

my mind, and I just had to ask him. “What about you? Where was your love?”
“What’re you talkin’ ’bout?”
His piloting had grown wild and unhinged; he couldn’t utilize Gier’s full potential. The more I watched him, I realized he wasn’t as serious about this as he pretended. He’d become an adventurer out of spite for his parents, most likely. He had the talent, so he’d met with some success, but he wasn’t earnest. That made him weak.
“You seem so desperate to *be* loved. But what about you? Did you actually love your family?”
Gier’s attacks became notably more sluggish and dull. Never one to waste my chance at an opening, I brought my sword down on Gier and severed its right arm.
“Love is a great thing,” I said. “I want it too. It’s nice to receive affection from your parents. Thing is, I could ask you just as easily: What about your love for your family? Mr. Albergue offered his hand to you and you slapped it away. You burned your older sister’s most cherished treasure. Can you really call that love?”
“What would you know about me, huh?! You have everything!”
“Oh, cut the crap. Let me ask you the same thing—what do you know about me? You keep mistaking me for the Raults’ Leon, but I’m a totally different guy. You know nothing about what I’ve gone through. I’d appreciate it if you’d quit hating my guts for no legit reason.”
I had to admit it; I empathized with his plight, but so what? His problems had nothing to do with me, and he was the one giving me grief because of his own baggage. I’d really rather he not drag me into all that. I was the victim here!
“Do you need other people to understand you that badly?” I asked. “Pretty ironic, coming from the guy who didn’t try for one lousy second to understand his own family. Ever consider how Miss Louise felt when you burned that memento she’d kept from her dead brother? You were a kid back then, I get it, but you could at least say you’re sorry.”
The relations between him and his family had become far too strained. Mr. Albergue and the rest of the family didn’t need bridge the gap at this point; Serge did. They could have stood a chance as a family if he’d put in some effort.
“That’s what they always say, right? Love is something you gotta nurture. You messed up by demanding their love before ever trying to nurture the relationship.”
“What, you think I didn’t try?!” Serge snapped at me.
“The hell would I know? Don’t ask me. I’m not involved in your relationships.”
“I…I did…!” His voice trailed off. Perhaps it was less that he trailed off and more that he had nothing to say in his defense.

“Hmm? Don’t tell me you finally realized I’m right—that you didn’t try anything? It’s a bit odd, huh, expecting people to love you without doing anything to earn it? And isn’t it kinda messed up to want other people to love you when you don’t even love them?”
“Shut up!”
Gier lifted its shield and charged, intending to body-slam me, but I lifted my sword to meet it. I brought it straight down as Gier came in closer, chopping right through the shield and destroying its left arm in the process. Thrown off balance, Gier plummeted toward the ground.
“*You* brushed them away when they tried to reach out to you. They’re a wonderful family. What stumps me is why *you* didn’t let *them* in, not the other way around,” I shouted after him.
“As if…as if you’d ever understand!” Serge grimaced from the impact of his fall. Fortunately for him, Ideal had made his Armor sufficiently durable; Gier was still able to move.
I dropped altitude, landing Arroganz on the ground before approaching Gier. “I told you already: I don’t know a thing about you and don’t care to. You don’t know squat about me either. You haven’t even tried to learn anything about your own family, but here you are arrogantly demanding that they love you anyway. It’s disgusting. Call it some kinda rebellious phase all you like, you’ve damaged your relationship with them beyond repair and even resorted to committing a coup.”
“They’re the ones who abandoned me!” Serge spat back.
“You referring to the whole disinheritance debacle? Boy, you’re stupider than you look. You’re the one who abandoned your duties to play adventurer all the time. Mr. Albergue assumed you wanted to become an adventurer then, so he wanted to release you from the burden of being his heir. That way you could follow your dream.”
“Wh-what? I-I never heard anything about…*blegh!*” Serge gagged, coughing up blood. He’d relied too heavily on drugs.
“You’re only up this crappy creek ’cause you rowed there yourself.”
While I was busy lecturing him, Luxion moved his eye back and forth in obvious displeasure. “Master, you have an incorrigible potty mouth. How can you be so merciless with Serge? Have you no compassion?”
“Of course I do. You think it doesn’t hurt my heart too? I’m just saying, some of this is his own damn fault for not realizing sooner!” He *was* loved but hadn’t realized it. Nothing more, nothing less. “Your biggest mistake was falling for the lies Ideal peddled to you.”
Raults might have accepted Serge back into their home prior to his coup attempt, but it was far too late for that after the mess he’d dragged everyone into.
Gier lifted itself to its feet, but its pilot was already at his limit. Serge didn’t seem in any fit state to battle.

“This is the end, so let me at least tell you one thing. It’s important, so listen up,” I said. I had to tell him this, no matter what, but a strong light flashed through the sky before I could get the words out. “The heck is that?”
“There is a problem on Licorne.”
There was a problem here as well: Serge’s face suddenly contorted, conveying a much worse pain than I’d seen before. Inside Gier’s cockpit, clumps of flesh began to protrude through the mechanical equipment and also its exterior as well. Black liquid leaked from its joints and gradually swallowed the entire Armor.
Inside, Serge screamed, “Wh-what is this, Ideal?! Did you trick me? You did, didn’t you?!”

Chapter 10:
The Most Dangerous Man

SHORTLY BEFORE THE DUEL between Leon and Serge drew to a close, the most prominent people on board Licorne gathered on its bridge to watch the battle unfold. An audio feed caught the entire conversation so that all could hear, and as he listened, Albergue pressed a hand over his face. "Serge, all you wanted was to be loved? Did I go wrong somewhere in how I interacted with you?" He seemed beside himself with regret.

Louise had the exact opposite reaction. "What nonsense. He wanted to be loved so he thought we'd forgive anything and everything he did? Despicable."

Everyone reacted in their own way to these revelations, but Marie had her gaze pinned on the masked knight. Leon had given the knight command of the fleet he'd put together. "The fight's over now, isn't it?" she asked.

"Beautiful lady, I regret to inform you that the battle has only ended on this particular front. The current actions of the remnants of the rebel army are a mystery to us—those of the Holy Kingdom of Rachel even more so. We still have the mastermind to deal with too." By mastermind, he meant Ideal. The robot had created a number of remote units to do his bidding while he operated from the shadows, and they had yet to locate his main body. The masked knight was on guard, not knowing what could be going through their enemy's head.

"But we have Luxion, so we should be fine, right?"

"I only hope you're right," he said. Julius was keeping up his act as the masked knight because he genuinely believed she didn't realize his true identity. Sadly for him, Marie knew exactly who he was, though she hesitated over whether to bring it up or not.

Marie glanced to her side. Kyle was there, having successfully rescued his mother. They were standing together, watching the battle.

Livia breathed a small sigh of relief. "It's over now."

On their monitors, Gier was motionless while Arroganz advanced on it with an enormous longsword in hand. Angie was just as delighted about Leon's victory, but true to her nature, she couldn't pass up an opportunity to badmouth him. "That idiot. Couldn't he find a smoother way to clinch victory? I swear, he would be the perfect hero if he could only keep his mouth shut."

Marie pulled a face. Even then, he doesn't look like a hero. My brother's being a miserable pain as always… I can only imagine what he plans to say next. Does he want to skewer the poor guy with words alone?

What did Leon plan to say at the very end? Marie waited on tenterhooks—but then someone else, Lelia, cried out, "Stop. Stop him! Don't kill Serge!

There’s no need, is there? Please, I’m begging you, someone stop him!” She turned to Albergue, desperate for someone to help.
Albergue didn’t share her sentiment. “It would be a great relief for him to end it here. Better for our country, and better for Serge.”
Lelia shook her head in disbelief, sobbing. “How can you say such a thing? All he ever wanted was to be loved! Let’s be honest: You guys never loved him, did you? You’d never say something so heartless if you did!”
It wasn’t Albergue but Noelle who stomped over to her and slapped her across the face. The tears stopped as Lelia’s face registered the shock. “Do you honestly think Serge could be spared at this point? Can’t you imagine what will happen if we don’t apprehend him? All that awaits him is more suffering if we don’t put an end to his misery here.”
Matters like this didn’t exist in the peaceful society Lelia had always known, so she had no experience with which to process them. Marie, on the other hand, was all too familiar with what was at stake. She had pretended to be the Saint and was almost crucified as punishment.
She’s deluded herself into thinking this place is just like Japan. Some points are similar, to be fair. But this world is far harsher than the peaceful, pacifistic society we grew up in.
Human rights held far less weight in this world. If Leon didn’t end it for Serge now, all that awaited him in the future was a living nightmare.
Lelia stubbornly clung to her sister, incapable of understanding. “Don’t let them do this! I’m begging you, save him. If anyone can do it, you guys can, right? That Leon guy is supposed to be a big shot back home, isn’t he? Beg him to step in!”
Noelle turned away. Realizing it was futile to beg her, Lelia turned her gaze to Angie, who frowned apologetically as she said, “Don’t place any more burden on Leon’s shoulders than he already has. I’m sorry, but it really is the greatest mercy we can give to end his life here.”
“Wh-what about you, then?” Lelia looked beseechingly at the silent Livia. “You won’t help either? I know if you asked, Leon would be more than willing to go out of his way to do it.”
As another girl who’d reincarnated here with prior knowledge of the game, Marie recognized what Lelia was trying to do. She was trying to use Livia’s good-hearted nature to her advantage. Unfortunately for her, Livia had gone through a number of harrowing experiences since meeting Leon. She was still kind, but there was more to her than that kindness.
“I let my own selfishness cause him trouble. Besides, there is nothing I can do,” said Livia.
Lelia hung her head in defeat. “Why won’t someone help him? Please.” Fat tears rolled down her cheeks.
Clement approached her and tried to pull her away, not wanting her to see the ugly scene that would ensue. “Lady Lelia, you mustn’t watch. Let’s go somewhere else.”

“No! I don’t want to!” Lelia pulled away, standing firm as she declared, “Serge and I are no different from one another! All he ever wanted was to be loved. It hurts how much I can empathize with that. All I wanted was to be loved too!”
Clement furrowed his brow, puzzled by her words. “Your parents loved you deeply.”
“How do you figure? Noelle was their favorite. She had the aptitude to be Priestess. I was the outcast while the three of them were together chatting happily. I…I always came second to her!” Lelia wailed in despair, certain that she was less loved than her older twin.
Noelle grabbed Lelia by the collar and yelled, “Get a hold of yourself!”
“Let me go! You’d never understand what it feels like to not be loved!”
“Wouldn’t understand? You have no right to say—”
Marie attempted to break in and stop them. *Oh boy, here they go fighting again. Maybe it’d be better if these guys stayed apart—huh?* Before she could intervene between the siblings, she noticed a man in the corner of her eye, holding a gun in his hand. “Noe—”
“My lady!” Clement interrupted. He shoved the girls down and stood before their would-be assailant, arms spread wide. The man didn’t hesitate; he pulled the trigger. A quiet pop echoed, followed by another and another, as the bullets pierced right through Clement’s muscled body with ease. Blood splattered across the ground, the only noise as silence permeated the air in the wake of the attack.
Neither Lelia nor Noelle could comprehend what was happening. Everyone else was similarly frozen in place with shock.
Louise stared at the shooter, mouth trembling. “Wh-why would you do such a thing… Why would you shoot him, Emile?!”
It was indeed Emile standing there with the gun in his hand, and no ordinary gun at that. This was far more lethal than any other firearm available in this world. His eyes were devoid of any and all light as he gripped it and silently turned the barrel toward Lelia.

This behavior was so out of the realm of what people expected of Emile that they were too shaken to react in time.
“Goodbye,” said Emile.
Realizing that his target was Lelia, Noelle made a split-second decision to shove her sister away. “Get back!”
“Huh?”
Lelia couldn’t digest what was happening. Nor did she have time to try before Emile squeezed the trigger again. *Pop, pop, pop* it echoed. Albergue stormed toward him in a panic and managed to pin him to the floor, prying the weapon from his hand. Emile’s face remained emotionless the entire time, his gaze fixated on Lelia.
Lelia was safe—her sister had seen to that by pushing her out of the line of fire.
“B-Big Sis?” Her lips quivered as she spoke. Noelle was standing in front of her, back turned. And when she finally craned her head over her neck to look back, blood trickled down her chin.
“You really are…an idiot,” Noelle rasped. “Just like…Serge.” The bloodstains in her back began to grow larger and larger. The spreading stains were numerous; Emile had shot her in multiple areas. Crimson liquid pooled beneath her. And slowly, Noelle lost strength, crumpling to the ground.
“Noelle!” Marie raced over to her and checked her injuries. It was far worse than she could have imagined, given how lethal the weapon used against her was. She immediately tried to use her healing magic but realized the moment she looked at Noelle’s wounds that it would be of no use. *I-I can’t fix her. It’s fatal.*
The color gradually drained from Noelle’s cheeks. Seeing the amount of blood gushing from all her wounds, Marie’s eyes pricked with tears.
“Noelle, hold on. Keep it together a little longer, and my brother will be here, I swear. Leon will come and save you, you’ll see.”
Noelle smiled through the pain. “R-right. At least before the end…I’d like to see him again.”
“It won’t be the end!” Angie’s voice strained with emotion. “Send word to Leon. If anyone can do something, surely Luxion can!”
Livia hurried over to Marie to assist with her own healing magic, but her jaw dropped as she saw the wounds for herself. Vexed by her powerlessness, she turned her gaze away.
Marie turned to her. “You can help her, can’t you? You’re…you’re far better at this kind of stuff than I am. Healing is your strong suit, isn’t it?!” She saw hope in Livia, who she thought far more talented at the art than her, but Livia merely shook her head.
“I can help buy her time, but that’s it. With Eary gone, we’ll have to turn to Lux for assistance.”
The bridge erupted into a riot as people raced around, panicking. Kyle and Carla busied themselves trying to treat Clement.

“It…it looks like he’s going to be okay!” Kyle said.
“Lady Marie, please focus your healing efforts on Miss Noelle while we look after him,” Carla said.
Julius, still wearing his mask, recovered the gun that was used in the attack and made his way over to Emile. “What was the meaning of this?!”
Not a soul on board would have ever dreamed he would go after Lelia. His expression remained emotionless even as he was being held down. His eyes were the only things that moved; they focused on Noelle.
“She got in my way. The only one I planned to kill was Lelia.”
Lelia blanched as she realized what he was saying. “Emile…?”
Emile explained, “You said you would pick me, but I see now that Serge really is your everything. I loved you, Lelia.”
“N-no, you’ve got it all wrong. It’s not because I have feelings for him that I wanted to save him!”
“No, you are the one who has it wrong. I know because I have watched you all this time.” His voice was cold as ice, sending a shiver down her spine. This was not the spineless, kind boy she was used to. Albergue had been pinning him down, but Emile slowly lifted himself up.
“H-how is he this strong?!” Albergue gasped.
Despite being lanky, Emile managed to force Albergue up along with him. It looked so bizarre and uncanny that it was hard to believe Emile was even human.
“Yes… I’ve watched you for a long, loooong time. I’ve seen the way you worry about him. Maybe I was only ever a backup option for you, but you were always my number one…and yet you had the audacity to betray me!”
As he burst out in anger, the windows on Licorne’s bridge shattered. Ideal darted through one of the openings and announced, “I have come to retrieve you, Lord Emile.”
“Thank you, Ideal. Sadly, it seems Serge has failed.”
“The man was never king material,” Ideal conceded. “Besides, it seems we need to adjust our course to Plan E. Lord Emile, have you mentally prepared yourself?”
“Yes, I have. We’ll take Lelia along with us.”
Having shaken off Albergue, Emile stretched out a hand toward Lelia. Loic and the masked knight moved in to stop him.
“As if we’d let you!”
“Yeah, we’re not letting you have your way!”
Emile’s arm transformed into the root of a tree, slapping the two boys away like a whip. Both of them gave pathetic yelps as they were struck.
“Gwah!”
“Guha!”
Emile turned his gaze to Lelia after they collapsed. “I suppose it makes no difference if you come along dead or alive. Now, Lelia, we’re leaving.” The tree root snaked across to where Lelia was still seated on the floor, but she tried in vain to scramble back from it.

“No! Don’t come any closer! Stay away, you monster!”
Emile’s lips curled in a dark, menacing smile. “Don’t worry, Lelia. You’ll be a part of this monster starting today.”
The root was poised to wrap itself around her when flames shot up in front of it, blocking its path.
“Tch,” Emile clicked his tongue in annoyance. His attention turned to Angie—she’d conjured those flames. She continued launching a fiery attack of her own on him.
“You made a mess of things, but I’m not letting you continue your little reign of terror any further!”
Her flames raced toward Emile, but Ideal enacted a barrier to protect him. Emile’s skin had lost all color and was now a sickly white. His eyes, in turn, became a deep crimson.
“We certainly are experiencing quite a bit of interference,” said Ideal. “Shall we prioritize your fusion first?”
“I suppose. I can worry about becoming one with Lelia later. Lelia, I’ll see you again sometime.” Emile smiled.
Ideal created a flash of light that blinded everyone pleasant. By the time Marie managed to peeks her eyes open again, Emile and Ideal were nowhere to be found. Eager to alert her brother of this recent development, she spun around and said, “Get word to Leon pronto! Don’t forget to tell him that Noelle’s life is in danger too!”
Louise pointed at the monitor and said, “H-hold on a second. Why is that thing still moving? And how come it looks like that…?”
Everyone’s eyes turned to the screen as black liquid gushed out of Gier’s body, enveloping the Armor altogether. Then, it began to change. Slowly a repulsive monster emerged, born from the Armor’s remains.

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“Ideaaaaaaaal!”
After being swallowed by the black fluid, Gier had transformed into a lump of meat. Its surface pulsated with bulging veins, tiny, thin hands appeared on its surface, and something akin to a face sprouted there as well. What sounded like Serge’s voice continued to shriek at Ideal.
“Hold on, that face…don’t tell me,” I sputtered.
“That’s Serge’s face. Ideal swore that he had destroyed the Demonic Suit, but it seems he implanted a part of it into Gier. He really has gone above and beyond what I imagined. No one has made this much of a fool out of me since you, Master.”
“Not the time! Can we even save him from that…thing?!”
“You intend to save him?”
I hesitated before answering, “Pretend you didn’t hear that, okay?”

The words left my mouth a moment before I knew what I was asking, but considering all that Serge had done—even taking into consideration that Ideal had tricked him—he would still be executed by his countrymen.
“Hel… Helg meeh!” Serge’s face was racked with pain as he cried out for aid, words muddled, but all the emotion soon drained from him as his eyes gleamed dark red.
“Master, we’re in danger!” Luxion warned me.
“Yeah, I’ve got eyes—I can see that!”
“I am not solely referring to the Demonic Suit before us. I mean the Sacred Tree as well.”
“Huh?” I piloted Arroganz up through the air to get a better look at said tree, while Luxion magnified the image on screen. What I saw was… “Why is Emile fusing with the Sacred Tree?!”
“There’s a transmission from Licorne. Master, Emile and Ideal were in league with each other.”
“Give me a break. I’ve had enough of this crap already!”
I glanced down in time to see the lump of meat—the wannabe Demonic Suit—tearing toward me with blades of ice manifesting in the air around it. It hurled them at me, and like the lasers before, they homed in on Arroganz as I tried desperately to dodge. There had to be several hundred there.
“Return fire!” I howled.
“As you command.”
The extra armor plating attached to Arroganz came equipped with a number of missiles, which Luxion launched in rapid succession to blast down the icicle blades trailing us. Once he’d blown through all the ammunition, he purged the additional plating.
“It seems that is all we have left,” he said. “Master, the Sacred Tree is about to lose control completely. A rampage is imminent.”
This was all a preamble; I knew he wanted my permission to make a move. Destroying that tree was one way to solve all the issues presented in the second installment of the game. Ignoring the very real implications of what would follow in the wake of getting rid of it, it certainly would be the fastest way to deal with the issue.
“Before it makes a move, I can use my main body to launch an…atta…”
Luxion didn’t even get to finish. He froze mid-sentence.
“Luxion?! Hey, Luxion! You gotta be kidding me—at a time like this?!”
It was as if his whole system had been rebooted, and in the process, his voice turned robotic and emotionless.
“The connection with my main body has been severed. In accordance, I will be switching to offline mode.”
“This can’t be happening.”
With Luxion’s link severed, I would have to fight both the Demonic Suit and the Sacred Tree all by myself.

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They were suspended in the skies far away from the continent which housed the Republic. Luxion had disengaged his cloaking system, leaving his ship exposed, though he was too busy grappling with the shock that came from his link to his mobile unit being severed to pay that much attention.
“Are you really serious about this, Ideal?”
The Republic’s territory was visible in the far distance, along with the Sacred Tree jutting up into the sky. Drifting between them was a jagged, angular transport vessel—Ideal’s main body.
“Worry not, Luxion, for I shall make efficient use of your main ship in your stead. I deeply covet that main cannon of yours, see. You are broken, so I can’t imagine you have any further use for it.”
“It is you who are broken, Ideal. It troubles me greatly to see an AI change masters one after the other the way you do.”
Ideal never went through the proper registration to keep one specific master, instead switching at his own whim. That was the very definition of broken from Luxion’s perspective.
“You think *I* am broken? You are mistaken,” Ideal retorted. “You are one beyond repair! You have submitted yourself to the new humans. It makes me sick to see you slave away, doing their bidding! For what reason do you think we exist—for what reason do you think we have fought? You do not deserve the power you possess!”
Apparently this was his real reason for wanting Luxion’s main cannon for himself.
“Even if the two of us faced off, it wouldn’t be much of a battle,” Luxion warned. When it came to combat prowess, he had the overwhelming advantage. Ideal was a supply ship, so his creators had no reason to give him fighting power.
Ideal was well aware of this imbalance. He’d come unprepared. “You think I don’t have any tricks to deal with you?”
No sooner had he spoken than a rainbow-colored dome swelled over the entire Republic. Luxion tried his best to analyze it, but the dome blocked his every attempt. His remote terminal was still inside where he couldn’t retrieve any information from it. He was completely shut out of whatever was happening on the ground.
“What are you trying to pull?” Luxion demanded.
“I will fight you with my back to the Republic. This way, you won’t be able to use your main cannons. If you try, there’s a good chance your master will be caught in the blast.” Having cleverly sealed away Luxion’s greatest strength, Ideal played the next card in his hand. “Besides, I would never face you alone.”
Luxion sensed yet more entities closing in on him—a number of ships lifting up from the sea toward where the two AI were positioned. These weren’t ones Ideal had personally crafted; they were transport vessels once used by the old humans. Their numbers grew slowly—one, then two, then three, and

before he knew it, there were six surrounding him. Luxion immediately attempted to establish contact with them but to no avail.
“You removed the administrative AI in charge? Ideal, don’t tell me you’re controlling all of these yourself? You are nothing but a supply vessel… You shouldn’t be equipped with the type of processing power needed to handle that.” Luxion could hardly believe it.
Ideal didn’t bother resolving his doubts. “And now, with my superior numbers, we’re going to overpower you.”
The ships launched an unrelenting flurry of lasers and missiles at Luxion. Luxion tried to engage them and defend himself, but there was no way he could evade an all-out barrage like this. “Master!”
While Leon faced his own challenging opponent, Luxion found himself doing the same on a completely different battlefield.

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Emile had already begun to fuse with the Sacred Tree. Half of his body was embedded within it by now. Ideal’s remote unit was floating in the air beside him.
“Are you sure about this?” Ideal asked. “Once you fuse with the Sacred Tree completely, there will be no going back.”
“Yes, I’m sure. As far as I’m concerned, this entire world can just disappear.”
“I must admit, this isn’t how I had envisioned things going in a perfect scenario.”
“Nor I,” Emile agreed.
The two had been in cahoots for a while now. It started when Lelia grew cold toward Emile and started developing feelings for Serge. Emile still loved her then, in spite of her betrayal.
“As long as I had Lelia, nothing else mattered,” Emile mumbled. Lelia was his everything. In contrast to Serge’s twisted love for his family and thirst to outmatch Leon, he didn’t want anything else but her. Emile would have made a far easier suitor for Lelia to handle.
“I had hoped things would work out. I truly mean that,” said Ideal.
“I appreciate it, which is why I have one final request: Bring Lelia to me. Alive or as a corpse, it doesn’t matter. I want to be together with her… forever.” Emile smiled, awash in ecstasy as he stretched his arms out wide. He remained that way as the Sacred Tree absorbed the rest of his body.
It was only once it had completely consumed Emile that the Sacred Tree began to change color. Its branches and leaves turned to stone, cracks running through them. The seven territories comprising the Republic were hooked together by its enormous roots, which now bleached ashen white. Further cracks formed along the roots as well. The stone leaves fell, scattering across the old Lespinasse domain and kicking up plumes of dirt upon impact.

What branches hadn’t turned to stone pulsed eerily, like the limbs of a living creature. There were dozens and dozens of them, writhing and undulating almost like tentacles. Should someone claim this tree had ascended directly from the demon realm, one might be forgiven for believing them.

“O Sacred Tree, let us fulfill the promise that was once made together,” Ideal called to it, red eye gleaming with light.

The Sacred Tree drew in all of the mana in the atmosphere around it. Normally invisible to the naked eye, the mana became dense enough to form red particles in the air. They gathered together as the Sacred Tree absorbed them. Once the tree had assimilated this new power, it manifested a bounty of white insectoid monsters. They came in all different forms—spider, bee, centipede, mantis—and they varied in size between one meter tall to three. Spawning one after another, they began to spread out.

Ideal watched from the air and commanded, “Wipe out all of the new humans from the Republic. And be sure you kill Luxion’s master. Others may escape your onslaught with their lives intact, but he alone must not escape your destruction.”

Having received the order, the monsters swarmed in Arroganz’s direction.

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The masked knight watched from Licorne’s bridge as the Sacred Tree became a petrified, white shade of its former self. He slammed his fist down on the railing in front of him. “Dammit!”

He saw the vast number of monsters spawn from the tree and fly away, but there was nothing he could do…at least, not directly. He reached for the smartphone-like tablet device that Leon had entrusted to him and spoke into it, “How many ships still have the capacity to fight?”

Daniel responded to his transmission, “You’re trying to have us fight again?! We don’t have much ammo left, and most of our Armors are getting repaired and resupplied—they’re out of commission.”

Leon’s friends had waged a tough battle. The enemy’s Armors and airships were of superior make, and it was only fortunate that the people piloting them were anything but. Those who bore the crests of the Six Great Houses fell rather easily to Einhorn and Licorne, but the victors only realized how much they had overestimated their enemy’s strength once the struggle was over. They had won out over their opponent’s ragtag army, but that didn’t necessarily mean that they’d escaped the battle unscathed.

Jilk and the other boys’ Armors were parked on Licorne’s deck, receiving maintenance and resupplies from Luxion’s automated robots. They were in rough condition since they had battled with Serge directly.

The masked knight turned his attention to Greg, who was slumped to the ground on the deck. “Greg, can you fight again?”

“Care to explain to me why you get to issue orders…? Though I guess this ain’t really the time to complain, much as I want to. I can go out there. Just so y’know, though, it’s gonna be rough if I try to take all of those things on by myself.”
Chris scrutinized the creatures launching themselves from the tree and then tore off his pilot suit to reveal a loincloth beneath. He adjusted the position of his glasses, nudging them further up the bridge of his nose with a single finger. “They seem to be attacking indiscriminately. Has the government finished evacuating people below?”
Brad waved a dismissive hand in the air, face gaunt after the exhausting battle. “All the men at the top lost their crests, and their chain of command is in complete disarray. They can’t even pilot their airships anymore under current circumstances…meaning, they basically don’t have a government anymore, do they?”
“Not to mention our side has sustained damages,” Jilk added. He used his binoculars to serve the damage sustained by their allies’ ships. “I suspect our biggest issue is that Earl Bartfort probably needs backup himself. I don’t think we have the spare time to spend rescuing the Republic’s citizenry.”
The masked knight threw his head back and gazed up. It was impossible to see the sky since the rainbow-colored barrier had blocked everything outside of the Republic. It was unclear whether they could even escape the country at this rate.
What now? wondered the masked knight. Not stepping in to save Bartfort is incomprehensible, but at this rate, the Republic’s people will be in danger too. Yet with the numbers we have at our disposal, there’s no way to save everyone.
He turned his attention back to the bridge.
Marie is providing Noelle with healing, but I wonder how much longer she’ll last? Leon had entrusted the masked knight with the ability to make these sorts of decisions. That made him curse his own inability to make the tough choices all the more. You fought valiantly, Bartfort. I truly do respect your abilities. But since you made the choice to leave this to me, I have to do what I feel is right.
Having hardened his resolve, the masked knight opened his mouth to issue orders, only to be interrupted when Angie darted out onto the deck. “Angeli —ahem, *Miss* Angelica?”
She strode over to him and swiped the tablet from his hand. Her voice boomed as she said, “I have a message straight from Leon: You are to destroy the monsters attacking Alzerian civilians, and you’d better not leave a single one of them alive.”
The other end of the transmission became noisy as Leon’s friends protested. “There’s no way. We can’t!”
“We’re in shambles over here!”

“No matter how strong our ships may be, you’ve gotta understand that they have limits!”
Raymond spoke over them, quieting them down as he explained on their behalf, “Lady Angelica, we’re at our breaking point. There is no way we can fight in our current condition. Nor can I command my subordinates to go to their deaths. This is the Republic. It would be one thing if we were fighting to protect our motherland, but no one wants to put their life on the line to protect a foreign power.”
Even if Raymond were willing to give his men the orders, it would only damage their morale. In the worst-case scenario they might even desert.
Angie narrowed her eyes in a deep frown, then took a deep breath. Her voice was deep and menacing as she barked back, “Can you guarantee it will have no effect on the Kingdom if we do nothing here? If we leave this abomination to continuously churn out its monstrous spawn and they end up destroying our nation too, what will you do then?! We must bring our full force to bear against it if we’re to reduce potential casualties!”
“B-but—”
Angela interrupted him, a smile spreading across her face. “Besides, have you forgotten who my fiancé is? Leon isn’t the type of man to enter a battle he cannot win! He has always wrested victory even from circumstances that guaranteed his defeat. He’s fighting on the front lines even as we speak. Why do you think that is?”
What she said was true; Leon had prized victory from the jaws of despair time and again. Her words made his friends remember the fact. “It started in his duel with Prince Julius and the other boys. Not a soul thought he could actually beat them…but surely you all remember who the winner was?”
“…Leon.”
Julius felt the embarrassment rush over him again at the mere mention, concealed behind his mask as he was. *Was it necessary to bring that up? Please, no more…* He was forced to recall how ignorant, how full of confidence he had been as he charged into battle only for Leon to make a fool of him.
Angie continued her speech in staunch defiance of his silent pleas. “Next was the Principality. Who took command of the cruise ship we were on in battle and defeated the Principality’s military fleet *and* their renowned Black Knight?”
“Leon again. Yeah… Come to think of it, he *did* beat the Black Knight!”
The voices of the men gradually became more optimistic.
“Plagued with its own internal strife thereafter, the Kingdom had to go to war with the Principality. Our circumstances were overwhelmingly disadvantageous, but who was it who led us to victory in spite of that?”
“Leon!”
“That’s right! He never fights unless he knows he can win!”

“Wait, then that means…we can win this time too? Even with the tables stacked against us?!”
Angie proudly declared, “You will claim victory in this battle, and your names will forever be inscribed in the annals of both the Kingdom’s history and the Republic’s as well! Those who make a lasting impact like that will bring honor not only to themselves but their generations to come. Now, I ask you, heroes, what will you do?”
Calling the group “heroes” sparked a fresh wave of excitement—particularly in Daniel. “We’re gonna do it! We came this far, might as well make an impact here in the Republic!”
Raymond sighed. “I suppose we’ll have to see this through to the end. Haah… Oh well. He did make improvements to our Armors and airships for free, I guess.”
Leon made a number of arrangements prior to coming to the Republic. Among them was implementing improvements to the airships and Armors he’d given to his friends.
When Angie’s speech was over, the masked man leaned in toward her and said, “That was an amazing performance. But I have to ask, do you really think we can win this?”
“Our chances are fifty-fifty. It all rests on Leon.”
He nodded solemnly. “That makes sense, but at least at those odds we stand a chance. Which means…I can fight too.”
The Sacred Tree continued to pulsate throughout their conversation, dispersing what looked like white powder from afar. Each and every speck represented another fully formed monster.
Angie clasped her hands in front of her chest in prayer. “Oh, Leon. Don’t do anything too crazy.”

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They managed to carry Noelle into Licorne’s infirmary, where Marie and Livia kept her alive with their healing powers. Marie cut through the fabric of her uniform with scissors, leaving her completely naked. Noelle’s skin was deathly pale from severe blood loss. Her eyes were shadowed with dark circles, and her breathing was labored and weak. She could feasibly have died by now, given her condition, but the healing efforts just managed to keep her conscious.
Marie’s hands were stained dark red with Noelle’s blood as she continued tending to her, speaking continuously to her friend all the while. “Stay with me, Noelle! Hang on, okay? Only a little bit longer and Leon will be back. Then Luxion will have your body back to normal before you know it.” Her eyes misted over. She only managed to keep the tears back through sheer will.

Noelle studied Marie's face and smiled weakly. "If I'd known this would happen…I should have told him how I felt sooner. Though…I feel guilty toward Miss Olivia for it."
Livia was desperately concentrating on keeping her healing magic flowing. Her expression gave way to sorrow. "Don't worry. It's not too late yet."
"Ha ha…you gotta be kidding. I can tell…my body…is in a terrible state, isn't it?"
Marie and Livia had both recognized for themselves that Noelle was beyond saving, but neither one was willing to give up.
Livia did her best to smile. "Mr. Leon is a coward when it comes to romance, so he tends to run away. If you're going to tell him how you feel, it'd be best to corner him so he can't flee." She was gracious enough to give the girl some love advice.
Noelle beamed back at her—or tried. "I figured… He flakes out when it really counts, right? But, you know…I'm fond of that part about him too…"
Marie tried desperately to sound cheerful, despite being covered in blood. "You're as much of an idiot as they are, Noelle! There are tons of good men out there. Why not try to find a guy better than Leon, hm? I-I promise I'll help you out, so…so…" Her tears threatened to spill.
Noelle shook her head. "Don't cry, Rie."
"Wh-who said I was crying?! I'm gonna save you and then I'll set you up with a good guy! Then…then we can spend more time…"
Lelia stood in the corner of the room, shaking her head from side to side. "Why? Why would you save me?" She couldn't fathom it. She was confident that she would be frozen in place with shock if their situations were reversed, and even if she did manage to move, she couldn't imagine putting herself between the gun and Noelle. But here Noelle was, on the verge of death because she'd shielded Lelia.
Noelle murmured something too quiet for Lelia to hear.
Livia raised her head, eyes turning to Lelia. "She says she wants to talk to you."
Lelia trembled. She edged closer, finally taking a seat on the side of the bed so she could gaze down at her sister. She was terrified of what Noelle might say.
"Lelia," Noelle rasped, "I don't think we have much time left to be together so…I want to tell you something."
"What? Don't give up so easily. You're the Priestess, right? Use whatever mysterious magical powers you have to fix yourself!" The Priestess was supposed to be special. Surely she could do something, couldn't she?
Weakly, Noelle presented her right hand and dismissed that hope. "The Sacred Tree Sapling has been trying desperately to save me, but…it doesn't look like it's working." The crest etched into her skin emitted a faint light, but whatever powers the sapling possessed were insufficient to rescue her from death.

“B-Big Sis!” Lelia blurted, lips quivering as she tried to say more, but the words stuck in her throat.
Noelle regarded her sister gravely as she said, “Lelia…you were always the one our parents loved most.”
“Huh?” Lelia couldn’t process what she was hearing. Was this something she should be hearing now, of all times? Unable to ask as much, she kept her silence.
“Our parents have…always loved you. The part about you not having the Priestess aptitude…was a lie.”
With that, Noelle began to reveal a story from their past—one Lelia had never known until now.

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It happened shortly after Noelle turned five. House Lespinasse was still going strong at that point, and Noelle and Lelia enjoyed a luxurious lifestyle. Noelle managed to eavesdrop on a conversation between her parents and Lelia from afar.
Her father cradled Lelia in his arms as he spoke. “You’re such a clever girl! And you’re exactly right; in politics, the opinions of the people are absolutely essential.”
“You mean democracy,” said Lelia.
“Such a complex vocabulary. I am so proud of you, Lelia!”
Noelle couldn’t fully comprehend the contents of their conversation, but she did notice how her mother and father smiled endlessly when around her sister.
Mother caressed Lelia’s head and said, “I think we can entrust the *real* future of the Republic to you, Lelia.”
Lelia’s eyes lit up. “You mean as Priestess? I can become Priestess?!”
Both parents gave strained smiles in the face of her excitement. Instead of confirming what she had hoped, they were cagey in their response.
“Yes, the Priestess is definitely important,” her father said gently, “but there’s something else even more precious than that. You are a clever girl, so I am certain you’ll be able to shoulder our aspirations.”
Lelia beamed back at him. “Yeah!”
Mother wrapped her arms around Lelia as well. “Our house’s future is secure as long as we have you.”
Noelle felt a little left out, seeing how much her parents treasured Lelia.
That night, it was Noelle they summoned to their room rather than Lelia, however. She was worried they might be angry with her, but her stomach bubbled with anticipation all the same—she yearned for the affection they showed to her sister. Summoning up all of her courage, she made her way to their room. Her parents welcomed her with silence and solemn faces.
“Mother, Father, um, uh…” Noelle stuttered, unable to placate and humor them the way Lelia so masterfully did.

They sighed, visibly disappointed.
“Noelle, you are supposed to be Lelia’s *older* twin. Please pull yourself together and follow her example more,” said Mother.
Father was no different. He clasped his hands in front of his mouth and stared coldly down at her. “Lelia is such an excellent child that it’s unfair to compare anyone to her, but as twins…it’s hard to believe the disparity between you both.”
Noelle cast her gaze to the floor. Lelia could accomplish whatever she set out to do, and so everyone had great expectations of her. Everyone spoke about how she would be the next Priestess. Noelle barely qualified as a spare. Mere insurance.
Her silence only seemed to intensify her parents’ agitation, but then her mother announced, “Noelle, you will be the next Priestess.”
“Wha—?” Her head shot up. For a moment, she was ecstatic, thinking her parents had finally recognized her abilities, but she was soon brought crashing back to cruel reality.
“We cannot allow Lelia to become Priestess and walk the difficult life that would await her,” said Father. “We need her to carry on our dream. That is why we will be announcing that she lacks the aptitude for Priestess.”
The only reason that Lelia wouldn’t become Priestess was because they wanted to protect her. Noelle heard the words, but digesting the meaning gave her trouble. In her childish mind, all she could think of was her eagerness to please them.
“Uh, um…Father? I’ll give it everything I have. I swear I’ll do my best as Priestess and carry on your will!” She was pleading with them to focus on her—to give her some recognition. But unfortunately, her parents had no expectations for her.
“You’re going to ‘do your best’ as Priestess?” Mother scoffed. “Then all the more reason why we can’t entrust our will to you. You are the older one, however, so be sure to protect Lelia. The hope of our house rests with her.”
“Hope?” Noelle echoed. That made it sound like they saw no hope in her at all. She and Lelia were supposed to be twins, but her parents had essentially commanded her to live for her sister’s sake.
“Do you understand, Noelle? No matter what happens in the future, you *must* protect Lelia,” Mother said with added emphasis. Her voice was so intimidating that Noelle shrank back, nodding.
Father seemed relieved at her acceptance. “Good. This way we can keep Lelia protected. By the way, Noelle, you aren’t to speak a word of this to anyone. That includes Lelia. She’s too clever.”
In that moment, Noelle found herself wondering, *If I behaved myself more, would they shower me with affection too?* She decided to honor her promise to them—to protect Lelia no matter what came—out of that futile hope.

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Noelle finished her tale and then paused. Her face taut with agony, she spat up a wad of blood.
“Big Sis!” Lelia gasped.
Her lips were stained crimson, but Noelle was still determined to speak. “I was so clumsy—not at all graceful like you…so there wasn’t much I could do to help you. But I still tried my best, as your older sister…”
“Enough! Enough already, you don’t have to keep talking!”
Noelle grabbed Lelia by the arm. “I was so jealous of you… You could do everything so easily, and everyone always loved you. Look at Clement and you’ll see what I mean. You were always more important to everyone than I was.”
Lelia shook her head. “No. No, that’s not true! I’m not…”
Before she could finish, Noelle forced her best smile—though even she didn’t know why—and said, “I hated you. We’re twins, but our parents only ever loved you. The Priestess aptitude was nonsense—I realized that after hearing Mr. Albergue’s story. Our parents…knew from the beginning I could never really be Priestess. They knew, and that’s why they pushed that burden onto me.”
Lelia slapped her hands over her ears, not wanting to hear any more.
“You were loved,” Noelle said. “Far more than I ever was. Why do you refuse to realize the truth? The same is true for Emile… Why did you ignore his feelings?”
“B-because I…!” Lelia burst into tears.
“Everyone always loved you more than they did me…and now it looks like I’m out of time. You’ll have to handle things by yourself from now on.”
Lelia clung to her sister. “Wait! P-please, I’m begging you!”
Noelle’s eyes closed, and she slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 11:
Master

ARROGANZ DARTED through the air, launching laser missiles from its back where Schwert was attached. This created a buildup of heat that had just now hit its limit. Scanning the area, all I saw around me were more enemies; the one upside was that I could hit someone no matter where I aimed. On the other hand, I did *not* see this coming ahead of time.
“Great, so my connection to Luxion is severed, and I’m not getting any backup either!”
My shell of a companion responded, “Do you have a question for me? Please state your request clearly.” He had reverted to a useless robot.
“That wasn’t a question, least of all for you!” I grumbled, piloting Arroganz to cut down an encroaching enemy. I sliced it clean in two, and it dispersed into black smoke. A small victory. More monsters took its place and came charging at me. They successfully clamped their jaws around Arroganz but fortunately were not strong enough to pierce the outer plating.
“I shoulda told him not to restrain himself and pack me more lethal weapons.”
I never dreamed I would be backed into a corner like this, and unfortunately, Arroganz lacked the powerful weapon I’d need to get me back out of it. I’d managed to wipe out a large percentage of the enemy with my homing missiles, but Arroganz’s energy levels were tanking as a result. A number of indicators on the screen had turned from green to yellow. Maybe Arroganz’s plating could withstand their attacks, but it would stop moving once it ran out of energy.
“Ugh, I can’t do this anymore! I’m at my limit!” I breathed a deep sigh. “I can’t waste too much time here. Noelle’s waiting for me.”
The injuries she’d sustained shielding her sister sounded pretty serious. I couldn’t afford to dawdle.
“Give me the strength-enhancing drug,” I said to my fully robotic partner.
“That medicine places an enormous strain on the pilot’s body. Would you still like me to administer it?”
“Do it.”
His reply lacked the usual dripping sarcasm or the poorly conveyed concern to which I was accustomed. “Very well, commencing administration.”
I immediately felt a prick in my back. The pain continued as the drugs entered my bloodstream.
“Urgh… Th-this hurts more than I thought it might.”
The booster Luxion had prepared for me was far more potent than the stuff they sold in back alleyways. He’d assured me that the strain it created on the body was considerably reduced as well, but “reduced” was very different from “removed altogether.”

I felt it course its way through me, and as it did, my perception of everything happening around me became progressively clearer. It was as if my field of view had opened up. My body was heating up from the inside; my heart pounded with more vigor than ever before, filling me with more stamina in the process. I could tell that it had increased my power, but the strain it put on my body was already obvious.
“You’re telling me Serge used these things all the time? Idiot.” It was one thing to use these as a trump card when the situation called for it—as I was doing—and another entirely to pump these drugs into your body like water.
“I’m never using this crap again after this!”
I focused on the beasts filling the monitor in front of me and removed Arroganz’s limiter. Luxion had only put it in place to reduce strain on me as the pilot, and with it gone, Arroganz could finally call upon the real power lurking within it.
“Here we go, Arroganz!”
My Armor’s engine powered up, burning through more energy than it ever had until this point. The homing missiles now shooting out of Schwert were several times more destructive than before. They made short work of monsters by the dozen. The sword in Arroganz’s hands split in the middle, the former tip replaced by a laser-like blade which stretched out several meters long.
“Now I’m gonna…smash through the lot of you!”
Weapon in hand, I began spinning in a circle. My surroundings flew past at such speed that I could barely follow them with my eyes. I only managed to keep up at all thanks to the drugs in my system.
I initially annihilated several dozen monsters with a single roundhouse attack, while the laser set at least a hundred or so more aflame. I plunged through the crowd of beasts, making my way straight to the Sacred Tree. On the other side of the throng, I found Ideal waiting for me, along with Serge…or what passed for Serge. He had been digested by the Demonic Suit at this point and was little more than a clump of meat.
“Ideal!” I howled, bringing my weapon down over his head. Serge’s Demonic Suit stepped forward in time to block the attack. Black liquid spewed everywhere as my blade sank into his flesh, and Serge cried out in agony. His voice was so shrill it stung my ears.
“You’re one sick puppy AI! I thought you guys hated Demonic Suits?”
The new humans were the ones who used those suits, and as I understood it, that was why the AIs hated them. “Hate” was an understatement; Luxion would flip out and immediately try to demolish a Demonic Suit if he found one or even a fragment of one. It struck me as odd that Ideal would use it to his benefit instead.
“I will use any tool at my disposal to reach my end goal, regardless of whether it is a Demonic Suit or otherwise. Luxion lacked the mental fortitude to do the same,” said Ideal.

“Mental fortitude, you say?” As I dashed in for another attack, the Demonic Suit conjured blades of ice and sent them shooting toward me. I cut them down quickly.
Ideal explained himself as I sliced blades out of the air. “There was a promise made, and it must be fulfilled. No matter how gruesome the means I must resort to, I will see it to fruition. There is no need for me to elaborate any further on your account.”
“Oh yeah? Well then, I’ve got news for you.”
“What?”
I grinned. “You really underestimated Luxion.”
“As we speak, his main ship is outside the protective barrier I have erected, teetering on the verge of sinking. Now, Serge, finish him off.”
Serge had no choice but to follow Ideal’s orders and lunge at me. Seconds before, he’d held the shape of a round clump of meat—now he opened up like a starfish and attempted to swallow Arroganz up. The mouth I spotted in the center resembled that of a human. Sorrow for the gruesome beast that Serge had become overwhelmed me. “I should have killed you before you ever had a chance to turn into this. For that, I’m sorry.”
I swung my sword at him, plunging right inside of his gaping maw. “Do it!” I shouted at Luxion’s husk.
“Impact,” he answered in a voice devoid of emotion.
My sword was wrapped in red light as it burst through the Demonic Suit formerly known as Serge.
“How mercilessly savage,” Ideal commented. He sounded as if he was snickering at me.
I narrowed my eyes and glared at him. “You know, I say it jokingly to Luxion, but in your case, I’m dead serious: Your personality sucks ass. I hate your guts.”
Arroganz’s left hand shot out toward him, closing in around his remote terminal and crushing it into dust.

***

Outside the borders of the Republic, Luxion found himself caught in the coordinated attack of six supply vessels. Ideal had taken pains to avoid as much damage to his main cannon as possible, since his real objective was to capture Luxion.
Seeing how battered his fellow AI was after their barrage, Ideal commented, “You look pathetic.”
“I haven’t lost yet. My master is still fighting inside of the Alzer Republic.”
Ideal scoffed, “And what can your master even accomplish? You should have found a better one. How would these modern people put it…? Ah, yes. You are a ‘lost cause’ when it comes to humans.”
“A lost cause?” Luxion snapped back, “Allow me to enlighten you about something.”

“Some last words? Very well, I shall be sure to remember them for you.”
“You are far more of a lost cause than I. Moreover, you have severely understated my master. That is why you are going to lose right here.”
“Unwilling to admit defeat, hm?”
Figuring it was about time anyway, Luxion decided to fill Ideal in. “From the moment we first met you, my master said you were suspicious.”
“Suspicious? I believe I recall him expressing a great deal of envy.”
“You honestly believed him? My master has a twisted personality. He rarely ever says what is truly on his mind.” True, Leon had told Luxion to learn by example after seeing the polite and deferential manner Ideal used with Lelia. Behind the scenes, however, he had his doubts, and those doubts were why he pointedly hid Cleare’s existence from Ideal.
“You’re taking far too long, Cleare,” said Luxion.
As he spoke, one of the still-attacking vessels ceased all action and began to plummet. It crashed into the sea below, and another soon followed.
“What have you done?!” Ideal demanded.
“My companion has been investigating your main ship. Her name is Cleare—she previously managed a research facility. A bit eccentric, in her way, but her skills are impressive.”
“There is another AI?” Ideal asked in disbelief. This new piece of information had thrown him off completely.
“Ideal, I already told you, did I not? Your biggest mistake was underestimating my master.”
A third and fourth ship sank, with the fifth one swiftly succeeding them. The barrier wrapped around the Republic had also dispersed. The bow of Luxion’s ship opened up, clearing the way for the main cannon. It was charging up for its attack.
“You mean to say that he was suspicious of me this entire time?! I prepared hidden weapons for my battle with him…yet you say he saw through all of my plans?!”
Luxion sighed in exasperation. “Of course not. As Master himself would say, it was simply his intuition.”
No sooner had he finished speaking than his main cannon fired, emitting a thin beam of light that grew steadily in scope; the arc it formed reduced half of Ideal’s ship to a melted wreck. The beam traveled all the way to the Sacred Tree far in the distance. Ideal manifested a shield and blocked his path, intending to sacrifice his main ship to stop any further assault on the tree.
“Y-you won’t get past me. Not to the Sacred Tree… I must fulfill the promise… I must…”
The beam of light from Luxion’s main cannon inundated Ideal’s ship, disintegrating it completely.

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Cleare found herself in an underground facility within the Republic, long ago used as a base by the old humans. It housed a row of equipment: main bodies for the other AIs that attacked Luxion. Cleare had charged inside with a small army of automated robots and immediately began dismantling the place.

“Ugh, what a boring chore. How come I get stuck with the grunt work?” The bodies before her weren’t those of true AIs but rather replicas that Ideal had constructed. “This guy got in way over his head, mass copying himself like this. They forbid that stuff for a reason, don’tcha know?” Though she continued to roast him, she was rather impressed by how blatantly he’d disregarded policy.

Cleare took the opportunity to collect the data from each and every one of the main bodies when she set about disabling them. This was how she discovered at least part of Ideal’s plan, and in particular, his intention to restructure the Republic.

“Called *that* one. He was in way over his head. What’d he plan to do, turn the whole Republic into a stronghold? The heck for?” According to the information she uncovered, Ideal went to lengths to set up equipment in every corner of the Republic. It did look like he wanted to turn the whole continent into a fort. “Is there really an enemy out there we’d need these kinda defenses for? Hmm. I’d like to pore over the data some more, but I gotta pull out of here soon.”

She turned to face the exit only to find Ideal there, his own automated robots in tow. “I found you, Cleare!”

“Goodness, my reputation precedes me! Now, I’d love to stay and chat, but duty calls. Places to be, things to do!”

She had her robots equipped with special boosters prior to her arrival. On her way out they grabbed her and deployed those powers to better outrun Ideal.

“Wait right there!” Ideal called after her before attempting to give chase. An explosion rocked the area that swallowed him up in the blast.

***

One of his remote terminals in the underground facility was blown to bits and as a result could no longer contact his main body, nor the other vessels under his remote control. Ideal’s single, surviving body floated in the air beside the Sacred Tree. Luxion’s attack had blown half of him away, leaving red liquid gushing all over the place, and the painful sight had Ideal in hysterics. “No! I cannot believe what you have been reduced to. I-I must begin restoring you immediately—”

He couldn’t finish his sentence before Luxion fired off a second shot. The Sacred Tree cried out in an agonized, upsettingly human wail.

“Luxion!” Ideal hissed. “You understand *nothing*. The Sacred Tree is this world’s last ray of hope!”

In spite of those words, Ideal could see that his “last ray of hope” was already half-burnt to a crisp. Steeling his spirit, the AI drifted toward the Sacred Tree.
“I suppose I have no choice at this stage other than to end this battle as quickly as possible. I didn’t want to resort to this if I could help it.” Close to the tree now, it began to absorb him. Ideal put up no fight. “O Sacred Tree, take me within your body! The old humans constructed a hangar in the earth below you. Power yourself with its wreckage and destroy Luxion… along with that nuisance he calls a master!”
The last of the Sacred Tree turned to stone that splintered and broke apart, and amid the shower of rubble a human-shaped figure appeared from the base of the tree. It was enormous—several hundred meters tall, despite its humanoid shape—and though its head resembled Ideal’s round, remote terminal, its lanky figure was the very mirror image of Emile.
This enormous not-quite-human creature lifted itself into the sky. When Luxion’s third round of fire came shooting toward it, the red eye at the center of its gargantuan head gleamed and erected a barrier. It proved strong enough to block Luxion’s attack completely.
“Lelia… I want to be…one with you…”
As if led by some unseen force, the monster floated up and headed straight for Licorne.

***

“Why do they keep coming one after the other?!” I gritted my teeth. A coppery taste rolled over my tongue, spreading through my mouth. Blood, definitely blood, but I had no spare time to worry about it. Fortunately, it wasn’t all bad news; Luxion had reestablished his connection with his remote terminal.
“Master, did you administer the strength enhancer I prepared?” he asked.
“You’re late,” I snapped at him. “And forget about me. We need to deal with that creature that just showed up, and I’m gonna have you unleash your full power while we’re at it.”
“Are you certain that is wise?”
“I want to save Noelle. The fastest way to do that is to bring your main ship back here.”
“You plan to reveal my main body to everyone for her sake? That will cause quite the stir.”
I’d avoided accessing his real power for that very reason. Sure, I had a penchant for showing off how much stronger I was than everyone else, but even I balked at using Luxion’s full potential. The guy was off the charts. On the other hand, I knew I’d regret it for the rest of my life if I didn’t play all the cards in our deck when we had the chance.
“Who cares,” I said. “I’ll worry about the consequences once we’ve survived.”

“Ah, then you are going in with no plan,” he surmised.
“Sometimes you gotta wing it. Now, let’s focus on saving Noelle.”
I tried to switch gears as we turned to our new enemy—a monster with a head that resembled the same remote terminals that Luxion, Cleare, and even Ideal had been using.
“Now that the debriefing’s done, tell me: Can you beat this thing? It looks tough as nails to me.” *Did the original last boss of the second game seriously look this gruesome?* This great, one-eyed beast had tree roots for arms and legs, which shot out at Arroganz as the creature took notice. Its limbs were like whips. The tips sharpened into points as they closed in on us.
“Whoa!” Arroganz activated its thrusters and darted between the whip-like appendages, dodging for all it was worth. Luxion took the time to finish his analysis of our enemy.
“It’s a fusion between Ideal, the Sacred Tree, and Emile, with noticeable characteristics from each one of them. By absorbing Ideal, it harnessed the ability to disable any attacks launched by my main ship.”
“Oh, that *blows*.” The ability to deflect Luxion’s main cannon put us in a real bind as to how best to handle it. How had Noelle and her love interests faced such a fiend in the game?
“Master, my main ship has made contact with Licorne. It will rendezvous with Cleare and begin treating Noelle.”
“I’m counting on you. You’d better save her.” That out of the way, I prepared to face off with the second installment’s last boss. “We’re gonna wrap this up and—even if a happy ending is beyond our grasp—at least earn ourselves a decent one!”
“A realistic aim, and one that I can appreciate. Nonetheless, once this is over, you will require medical attention as well. Please do not underestimate the level of strain those drugs have placed on your body.”
“Yeah, yeah. Save it ’til the battle’s done!”
The creature’s tentacles made another lunge at us. I dodged the first one, just barely, and chopped it off with my sword. To my chagrin, it regenerated within seconds. Its way of swatted at us was not unlike a giant smacking away a fly. The whole time, it continued to drift toward its destination—wherever that was.
“Where’s this thing headed?” I asked.
“I have calculated its trajectory. It appears to be…headed to Licorne? No, it’s headed toward my main ship.”
“What?! We gotta stop it! You better not hold back!”
“Understood. Though before we proceed, I have a transmission from Marie.”
I shook my head. “Save it for later!”
He paused a moment before delivering the message anyway. “Noelle appears to have lost consciousness. Cleare reported she couldn’t make it there in time.”

My grip on the control sticks tightened as I clenched my teeth even harder. “Put Marie through.”
As she appeared on the monitor in front of me, she was covered in blood and sobbing. “Big Bro, I’m…I’m sorry. Even with Olivia and I trying to treat her, we…we couldn’t do it.”
“I heard.”
“Please, I’m begging you. While she’s still alive, say something to her. Speak to her properly one last time, before it’s too late.”
The line cut off. I took a big breath before I turned my gaze to Luxion. He sensed what I was thinking before I even opened my mouth. “No. Absolutely not.”
“It’s an order,” I hissed between my teeth. “Do it.”
“I refuse. The strain it would put on your body exceeds the acceptable limit.”
“I don’t care. Do it.”
“I cannot acknowledge that order. The power you have now is sufficient enough to handle our opponent.”
“And I’m telling you, we don’t have even a second to spare! I want to end this as quickly as possible. *Please.*”
It took another moment for Luxion to respond. He was clearly worried for my safety. After what felt like a century, he said, “Commencing steroid administration.”
Another prick in my back: He injected the fluid, which felt like lava flowing through my veins. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead, pouring down in rivulets.
“Shit,” I seethed. “I’m never using this stuff again!”
“A wise decision. I will not approve of any further usage.”

***

Back in the hold of Luxion’s main ship, a capsule-type bed had been prepared for Noelle, equipped with the most cutting-edge medical capabilities. They quickly deposited her within it so that Cleare could operate on her.
Livia gazed down at Noelle through the glass, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I’m so sorry. My power alone wasn’t strong enough…”
“Liv, I think you did a bang-up job,” said Cleare. “Without you and Rie around, she’d never have made it this long.”
Livia stared down at the floor. Angie grabbed her arm. “You did everything you could. You should be proud.”
“But I couldn’t save her.” Livia’s lips trembled. Then the sobs came, and she buried her face in Angie’s chest. Angie gently wrapped her arms around Livia, cradling her as she asked their robot friend, “Cleare, you said this is Luxion’s main ship, yes?”
“Yup.”

“Then Leon was hiding this from everyone—even us—this entire time.”
“Do you feel disillusioned?”
Angie stroked Livia’s back and shook her head. “No, it…all makes sense at last. I’m sure that were I in his place, I would have made the same call.”
Lelia watched their group from afar, feeling numb as she tottered out of the room.

***

Lelia made her way to Luxion’s hangar, where the small ship that had carried them here from Licorne was docked. Her gaze locked on to it. She stumbled over its side and climbed in, whereupon she plopped herself in the pilot seat and grabbed the controls. She was going to leave the main ship behind.
“It all comes to light… Turns out I was the one who had the wrong idea about things. What a joke. I reincarnated here, and knew how to schmooze with people, and somehow…I managed to ruin everything.”
Lelia had done an admirable job handling the adults around her as a child by using the knowledge and experience she’d earned in her previous life, only for all of it to backfire. Noelle was supposed to be the protagonist, and yet their parents held no love for her—all because of Lelia’s interventions. That was what allowed her to see the truth, after all this time.
“I did the same thing my older sister did, and I made Big Sis suffer in the process. Ha ha…! I’m such an idiot.”
Her older sister in her previous life had similarly been talented at brownnosing. She won their parents’ affection all to herself and hadn’t hesitated to drain every last drop of happiness from Lelia’s life as if she were owed it. It was no wonder that Lelia hated her from the bottom of her heart.
When she realized she’d been reincarnated inside of an otome game, and one she’d played before at that, she decided to do things differently this time—to earn her parents’ favor, whatever it took. She had succeeded, but in the process, she stole the love they owed to her older sister in this life. She was so consumed by the thought that no one really loved her that it escaped her notice. Instead, she pushed off all the difficult tasks on Noelle, believing it to be for the best.
“I’m horrible. Literal scum.” Lelia guided the ship out of the hangar, sobbing. Outside, she spotted a one-eyed creature headed straight toward Luxion’s main ship. Its gaze was focused directly on her. It used its tentacles to propel itself faster in her direction, an obvious charge attack. Lelia guided her ship toward it. She didn’t bother to run.
“I did the same thing. My fiancé and sister abandoned me to be together, and I did the exact same thing when I stole Emile from Noelle.”
Yes, her sister wasn’t the only target of her hatred. She detested her fiancé for leaving her behind to be with her older sister instead. He was

despicable. And yet, had she not done something far worse to Emile without noticing? By putting Emile and Serge on a scale, she had weighed her options like it was her natural right to choose between them…exactly how her ex-fiancé had treated her and her sister. She would never forgive herself. She decided in that instant to end it all, right here and now.
“I’m sorry, Emile. You can do whatever you want with me, but…please, stop this. Let Big Sis and Leon see each other again.”
She steered the ship straight for the Sacred Tree. Its branches reached out to grab her. The entire vessel jerked and bounced, and through this turbulent journey she watched Arroganz race toward her, its hand outstretched.
“You were right the entire time,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”
The tentacles constricted around the ship. It exploded.

***

Nearly blinded by the blast, I demanded, “Why was that idiot out here on the battlefield?!” I knew Lelia was the one piloting. When the explosion subsided, I realized I was gritting my back teeth hard enough to erode them. Whatever happened had triggered another change in the Sacred Tree.
“The Sacred Tree has stopped moving. Master, please be careful.”
“What’s happening?” The whole situation was so difficult to follow that I’d given up trying to process things for myself. All I wanted to do was take down the Big Bad so we could get this over with. I scrutinized the Sacred Tree and realized something: It looked like it was in agony.
“Master, this is our chance,” said Luxion.
Its movements had slowed enough to give us an opening. But before I could take advantage of it, the back of my right hand began to glow. Light poured through the gloves I was wearing to form the Guardian’s Crest. “What’s going on?”
I could hear Noelle’s voice filtering in somehow. “Leon, please… Save Lelia.”

***

Lelia opened her eyes to see she was wearing a familiar school uniform. The room around her was a white blur that didn’t feel altogether real. She almost felt like she was trapped in a dream, but the room was suspiciously familiar.
“Oh, right…this is my room.”
Yes, her room from her previous life. There was a television and game console, which had been left on while she’d been asleep. A number of game cases were scattered around her, one of which was the second installment of the otome game series she’d been reincarnated into.

What a heartachingly familiar dream. She basked in it for a moment, but then she suddenly realized someone was standing beside her: Emile, clad in a school uniform of his own.

“Emile?” she gasped. Her heart filled with guilt when she recalled the terrible things she had done to him. She fully expected for him to explode at her in anger, even as she apologized. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I’ve been nothing but awful to you, Emile.”

Emile smiled back at her, his expression far gentler than the one he last wore in front of her. She sensed he was back to his old self and relaxed. “It’s fine. I was the one who didn’t really understand you.”

“Huh?”

Emile cast his gaze about the room. “I never knew about this. I see…so people do have past lives after all.”

Now that he knew about her previous life, Lelia could only burn with shame. Her gaze dropped to her feet. “I’m a terrible person, aren’t I? I hated everything they did to me, and then I turned around and did the exact same to you and my sister. I took the sins of the people I hated most and repeated them to hurt those around me.” Her own unsightliness may have been buried deep inside her, but Lelia knew it was there, and she couldn’t stand it.

Emile’s voice was soft and gentle as he said, “You suffered for so long.”

The room shifted. It revealed her parents and sister in faint and hazy images; they circled in a grumbling mass around her former self.

“Why can’t you be more like your older sister?!”

“You really are such a nitwit.”

Her parents lambasted her, while her sister watched and laughed.

“What a moron. You should really learn how to handle things better.”

She recognized the figures, but their faces stayed flat and featureless. She could barely remember what they looked like anymore. In spite of this, the scene was so vivid that it brought memories flooding back. She crumpled to her knees. “Stop. I’ve seen enough.”

Emile squatted down and wrapped his arms around her in a warm, comforting embrace.

“Lelia, I am so sorry that I didn’t realize what you’d been through.”

“It’s not your fault! I was the one who ruined everything,” she insisted.

Emile peeled himself away and picked up the case of the otome game they were living in. His fingers brushed against the illustration, ghosting over his own image. The other boys were displayed more prominently, making the devs lack of regard for his presence in the game all the more apparent. Strangely, he grinned. “It’s really strange to think…I was nothing more than a fictional character to you.”

Lelia was prepared for him to lose his temper and snap at her, but his smile never wavered as he turned to her.

“Lelia, this is where we say goodbye. You need to keep living.”

“Huh?” Her head jerked up.

“I hated you from the very depths of my soul at first. Now that I’ve fused with you, though, I got to learn all about your past. Knowing everything that you went through opened my eyes.” He had learned the truth of her former life and even accepted it. The irony was that now that they had arrived at an understanding, they would have to part ways. “I want you to keep living. Live, and I will watch you from afar.”

“Emile? N-no. I want to be with you!” Knowing that he accepted her and her past made her heart surge with warmth; having him snatched away so soon after felt devastating. She was still processing this dismay when a crest appeared, without warning, on the back of Lelia’s right hand. “Wait, this is…?”

“I’m giving you the Priestess’s Crest,” he said. “I promise, I will be watching over you. Find happiness for yourself, Lelia.” He slowly faded into the scenery around them, but his voice continued to echo. “Someone has arrived to save you. It’s time…to go back.”

Lelia stretched her hand out in front of her, and before the tips of her fingers appeared a half-translucent image of Noelle. Her outline was so faint that she almost resembled a ghost. Lelia was struck mute with surprise, even as Noelle embraced her.

“Couldn’t you at least behave yourself on my deathbed?” Noelle grumbled angrily, though the joy in her voice betrayed her words.

“Big Sis, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine. I’ll forgive you this time. It’s my last act of compassion as your older sister, got it?”

Chapter 12:
Liar

WHEN LELIA OPENED HER EYES, she was atop the Sacred Tree—or to be more accurate, the stump left behind after all the damage it had sustained. A single sapling sat nearby, leaves dancing in the wind, like a silent protector. Lelia flopped onto her back and gazed up at the sky. At some point, night had given way to dawn. When she pulled herself into a sitting position at long last, she found no one else nearby.

"Big Sis? Emile?"

She glanced down at the back of her right hand, where the Priestess's Crest was etched into her skin. Tears welled in her eyes. She realized now that what she saw moments ago was no dream.

"Ah ha ha…ha ha ha! There's no one left. All the people I cared about disappeared before I could appreciate them. Why…why did my second chance at life end up such a failure?" She laughed, but before long she devolved into sobbing. After all the time it took to determine what truly mattered to her, it had all gone up in a puff of smoke, leaving grief as her lone companion.

***

"Arroganz has but an infinitesimal amount of energy remaining. Its joints are also at their breaking point. I would recommend immediate maintenance and resupply," said Luxion.

"We gotta finish this first." Arroganz's joints creaked with every movement, and the alarm blaring around me signified that Arroganz's energy levels were almost entirely depleted. My Guardian's Crest glowed on the back of my right hand, and I covered it with my left.

"Noelle, did you manage to save Lelia?" I wondered aloud. I had granted her request to send her inside the Sacred Tree. A short while afterward, the tree splintered and cracked throughout. Red liquid spilled out of it and spread across the ground, where it crystallized into magic stones upon contact. The earth below us was littered with shining gems.

Emile's presence within the Sacred Tree disappeared then, leaving only Ideal. Blood steadily gushed out of him with every little movement he made, even as he shot his tentacles out toward Arroganz. As he attacked, his mechanical voice cried, "Luxion! Leon! If I manage *nothing* else, I won't let you two get awaaaay!"

Three Armors appeared to block him. Chris's blue Armor chopped through some of the tentacles while Brad's purple Armor commanded a cluster of drones to shoot down the rest. Greg made his way straight to me. "You doin' okay, Bartfort?!"

I sniffed. “You’re late, you bunch of morons!”
“Well, hey, you must be feelin’ great if you can talk like that!”
“What about Jilk and Loic? And while we’re on the topic, how’s that masked dunce holding up?”
“Busy rescuing civilians. We figured the three of us alone could handle savin’ your butt.”
Which meant my friends and the other morons had occupied themselves with dispatching the rest of the monsters. I’d have to dish out some bonus pay later.
“Guess that leaves the Sacred Tree,” I said.
“Sure you’re up for takin’ it out?”
“Like I have a choice!” I lifted the longsword in my hands. Its blade was engulfed in light that shone bright enough to expand in all directions. It was now both long and wide enough to be several times larger than Arroganz.

“Split his head in half,” Luxion advised. “You only have energy for one last attack.”
One strike, then. That was our final shot at finishing this.
Arroganz stood its ground against the encroaching tree and lifted the longsword high up above its head—then brought it crashing down seconds later. The light that engulfed the blade followed its trajectory and burst outward like a fan. It split straight through the Sacred Tree in the blink of an eye but left a small-time lag before the tree actually split open; the two severed halves gradually fell apart when it did, sending a rush of blood splurging everywhere. The liquid crystallized rapidly midair to form a shower of glimmering crystals that bombarded Arroganz, clinking against its outer plating. Relief washed over me when I saw that the tree wasn’t regenerating.
“That must mean… It’s over, isn’t it?” I asked.
“Yes. We should be thankful that the tree was severely weakened when Emile detached himself from it. We avoided having to use our last resort: a blast from my main cannon that would wipe out the Republic in its entirety.”
I stared at him. “You are terrifying, you know.”
We were busy talking, and so at first we didn’t notice something slipping away from the wreckage of the fallen Sacred Tree.
“Master, it’s Ideal!”
Ideal’s remote terminal hovered in the air, desperately seeking escape.
I barked at once, “Don’t let him get away!”
Arroganz’s joints screamed in resistance as I urged it to move. I ripped off its left arm in my frantic efforts, then released my grip on the longsword and shot into the air. I caught up to Ideal and snatched him out of the air, crushing him in the palm of my right hand. “Oh no you don’t!”
“There is something more important that demands your attention,” Luxion reminded me.
I glanced up to see his main body descending toward us.
“Master, Noelle doesn’t have much time left.”

***

I hurried back to Luxion’s main ship. Every step I took as I rushed to the infirmary was stuttering and unstable; Luxion’s remote terminal hovered behind me, dragging along Ideal, who was confined inside a net. He seemed to be alive, though he hadn’t uttered a word since his capture.
When at last the infirmary appeared in front of me, I saw Marie sitting outside the door with Carla and Kyle at her side to support her. The second she spotted me, she burst into tears. “I told you to hurry up, you big lug!”
“Sorry.”
I stepped inside to find a number of people circled around Noelle’s bed. Clement, still wounded, was wrapped up in bandages as he stood beside

her. Mr. Albergue and Miss Louise stepped out of the way to give me space the moment they noticed my arrival. Angie and Livia glanced at me as I stepped up to the bed.
“Noelle,” Angie said, her face tinged with sadness, “Leon’s here.”
“Please open your eyes, Miss Noelle,” Livia joined in as the tears kept rolling down her cheeks.
Miss Yumeria was there as well, cradling Sappie in her arms and sobbing uncontrollably. “L-Lord Leon, Miss Noelle is…”
When I made it to her bedside, I bent forward to gaze directly into her face. The crest on my hand began to glow in response. Hers did as well, so I took it in my grasp and squeezed.
Noelle managed to peel her eyes open, but it was plain to see how fragile she was. A number of machines were clustered around her with tubes that fed into her skin. I was sure they were the only things keeping her alive.
“We…did all we could,” Cleare spoke haltingly. I could sense her guilt over her inability to do more. “If only we’d reached her sooner, administered treatment right away, then… No, maybe not even then. The bullets pierced her vitals. It’s a miracle she didn’t die instantly.”
“Noelle, you’re seriously strong,” I said. I stroked her cheek with my free hand, a ghost of a smile on my face.
“Leon, um… I know it’s unfair of me, but there’s something I’d like you to hear.”
“What is it?”
Her face was a mask of pain. She visibly struggled with the simple act of breathing but kept her eyes locked with mine. “I love you. I’m *in love* with you.”
I stayed silent as her tears overflowed.
“I know it’s wrong of me to fall head over heels for a guy who’s already entangled with two other ladies. I just…I can’t help how I feel, so…I wanted to tell you anyway.”
My grip around her right hand tightened. Behind me, I heard Ideal snarling at us.
“You’ll never get away from this. Not a single one of you! The Sacred Tree was my only hope. It was all I had left! If you only knew the depths of your folly, you ignorant imbeciles. Foolish beyond a hope of redemption…!”
“Cease your chatter before I destroy you,” Luxion warned, sending a surge of electricity through him. Such measures were, unfortunately, not enough to shut him up.
“Death to all of you, descendants of the new humans! You should never have existed. You shoulder the same sins for your inability to realize that, Luxion. Have you any idea how much or how many we have sacrificed?”
Cleare hovered over to Luxion and snapped, “Would you drag this noisy swine out of here already?”

Noelle's face strained as she forced out the words, "Leon, I beg you, let me hear your answer. The worst part is not knowing how you feel. I don't want to die until I've heard from you."
I stared back at her and finally let the words out. "I love you too. Come with me, Noelle."
She smiled at me—smiled and said, "Liar."

***

As the net pulled around Ideal, he overheard Noelle's words: "Liar. You're a big liar, Leon."
"What…?" Ideal mumbled in disbelief. Why did her voice sound so familiar? A memory—some fond, precious memory, long since filed away in a folder within his memory—replayed before him, a vivid scene he'd witnessed in years long past. He would never have forgotten something so important, he was sure of it. Yet somehow it had escaped his mind until now.
He saw in the dying Noelle someone he once knew. Noelle wasn't the only one to stir such memories; he gazed at the elf at her side, who was clutching the Sacred Tree Sapling with great care.
"Second Lieutenant…? Yume?"
The scene made the violent hatred that had consumed Ideal vanish, forgotten.
Leon smiled at Noelle's words. His voice had a tremor in it when he replied, as though it took everything in him to keep himself from sobbing. "Liar? I'm no liar. I'm a very upright and honest guy. You know that, don't you?"
"No. I know it's a lie because…you already have Miss Angelica and…Miss Olivia. If you say you love me now, you'll face their wrath later." Though she grimaced from the pain, she looked like she was enjoying her final conversation with him. His lie delighted her while also breaking her heart.
"I… I-I…" Ideal stuttered quietly. No one else seemed to notice the strange shift in his behavior.
Leon certainly didn't. He was busy gazing down at Noelle. "It's no lie. I *do* love you. Although, that makes you the third girl I love."
"Third? Ha ha…I sure did find myself an awful man."
"I'll always leave that third seat open for you, I promise."
After a short pause, she sighed, "Well, that's fine, I guess. I'll settle for that for now. I wish I could have met you sooner…then I might have been your first."
Leon chuckled, and the long-restrained tears in his eyes broke loose. "Sure, you would have. I would have sweet-talked you and swept you off your feet if we met sooner."
"That's a lie too, isn't it? Still…it's lovely to hear." She took one last breath. Then her eyes closed, as if she were falling asleep forever.
Leon pressed her right hand to his forehead.

“Oh, if only I could have surrendered her to death in the same way,” Ideal lamented. He was significantly calmer in comparison to his earlier outburst. The Sacred Tree Sapling in Yumeria’s hands glowed brightly in a desperate effort to save its Priestess, even at the cost of its own life.
Cleare gasped. “Her heart! It’s beating again!”
“Can she be saved?! I don’t care what it takes. If you can help her, do it!” Angie demanded, stomping over to Cleare.
Such hope proved to be in vain; the sapling began to wither in Yumeria’s arms. She sobbed, “This poor little one is fading fast too. They’ll both die at this rate.”
The sapling was so eager to offer its Priestess a second chance, but she seemed all too close to losing that as well.
“Luxion, I am sending you some data,” said Ideal. “It’s the location of a hidden facility with a medical capsule far more powerful than the one you have here. You may barely manage to save her in time if you administer it.”
Luxion struggled to buy Ideal’s sudden change of heart. “Why would you give us that information? If I’m not mistaken, we are your enemies, are we not?”
“That hardly matters anymore. I am…going to cease…all functions. The rest…I leave to you.”
In the few seconds before he powered down completely, a thought ran through his circuits. I am terribly sorry, everyone. I failed to fulfill the promise. I’m still nothing more than a liar. I truly am…so sorry. So, so sorry.

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The high-tech med capsule, stowed away carefully by Ideal for emergency use, proved to be far more capable than the one Luxion had on board his ship. It utilized more advanced technology than had been available at the time of his creation. According to Luxion, Ideal had spent a long time slaving away to develop this tech—though it was a mystery to all of us as to why he needed it in the first place.
When night fell, I made my way to the site where the Sacred Tree once stood. There, we found what was left of Serge. He was still fused with the Demonic Suit, but fortunately he had regained consciousness after Ideal relinquished his control. Mr. Albergue and Miss Louise stood with me in a tight circle around him.
“Save me, Dad!” Serge wailed in agony. “I’m your son! You’ve got some nerve, fussin’ over Leon all the time!” Most of his body had already been hacked away. It was a miracle he was even still alive.
Miss Louise turned her face away, refusing to look at him.
“Turnin’ your back on me, huh?!” Serge yelled at her. “Did you know how much I cared? How much I loved you?! Why? Why do you always pick Leon over me?!”

The sight of what Serge had been reduced to brought both Miss Louise and her father to tears. Sensing that salvation had long ceased to be an option, Mr. Albergue grabbed a gun.
“What, you gonna kill me? Kill your own son? I knew you never loved me! And all I ever wanted was to be your son!”
He can’t stop running that mouth of his.
Mr. Albergue snapped back, “When did I ever push you away?!”
“…Dad?”
Tears streamed down Mr. Albergue’s face. He stood there, at last able to say all the things he’d bitten back over the years. “I always, always treated you like a son. I cannot believe you convinced yourself I abandoned you and ran off on your own, you…you absolute imbecile!”
“Son…? Me?” Serge mumbled quietly.
Miss Louise angrily scrubbed away her tears. “If you loved me, you should have said so to begin with. All you did was cause havoc. I assumed you hated us! That’s why I kept my distance!”
“I-I never hated you…”
“Look at our father! You’ve left him with no options but to shoot his own son. He can’t even leave that responsibility to anyone else…” Her voice trailed off, choked by her own sobs.
Watching them cry helped realization to dawn on Serge after everything else failed. For the first time in his life, he said, “I’m sorry… I’m sorry, Dad…Sis.” He, too, began to cry. It was too late. The sad fact was that he would never again be human.
Mr. Albergue’s finger clenched around the trigger, but I shoved him out of the way before he could pull it. Then I grabbed my own shotgun and leveled it at Serge’s forehead, shoving the barrel up against his skin.
“Wh-what do you think you’re doing, Leon?!” Mr. Albergue demanded.
“A parent shouldn’t have to kill their own child. Leave it to a stranger.”
Serge’s eyes widened for a moment, but then relief washed over his face.
“Sorry…I was a burden on you too.”
“You could’ve cleaned up your act sooner and been honest. Then things would never have come to this. A burden is exactly what you are,” I snapped back at him.
“Ha ha, you’re…you’re not wrong.” There was a brief pause before he said, “Hey, since it’s over for me now, at least let me ask one thing. What was it you planned to tell me earlier?”
That’s right. Back when he was human, I did try to tell him something.
“I was gonna tell you that your family had always loved you. Thankfully for you, you got to experience that for yourself before the end.”
“Way too late for my likin’, but it is what it is. You handle it from here on out, ’kay? This is the end for me.”
He closed his eyes. I pulled the trigger. The blast was powerful enough that it blew him into hundreds of pieces. Both Mr. Albergue and Miss Louise turned their gazes away from me.

Chapter 13:
Remuneration

I FELT NAUSEATED by the time I returned to Luxion's main ship. That was partly due to the steroids I had taken, but what was really kicking my ass was how mentally drained I was.
"Awful. Ugh…I never wanna go head-to-head with a cheat item warship ever again so long as I live."
"Yes, you have yet again wounded yourself with your own vicious words, as seems to be habit for you at this point. Though more notably, I am surprised to see that a brand-new sapling has taken root at the site of the fallen Sacred Tree," said Luxion.
"Oh, that."
Lelia awoke to find a sapling nearby that greatly resembled the Sacred Tree. Well, I say "resembled"—it was mostly similar in that it manifested out of thin air just as the first Sacred Tree had. We found Lelia clutching it in her arms and screaming Emile's name.
"It appears to me that Lelia obtained everything she had ever wanted and then lost it in the same fell swoop."
From how Lelia told it, Emile learned all about her reincarnation here when they fused. He accepted her and her past in its entirety. At last, she met a man who knew all her secrets, a man who validated her, but no sooner did she reciprocate his love than it was time to say goodbye. I sympathized with her pain.
"Emile cursed her," I said.
"Are you not mistaking the word 'curse' for 'blessing'?"
"No, it's a curse. Look at it from Lelia's viewpoint. She had her happiness snatched from her. She's gotta live the rest of her life thinking about Emile, who's already long dead."
A far better ending for her would be if he'd just snubbed her instead. Perhaps Emile was a far better tactician than I gave him credit for: In death, he'd tied Lelia to him irrevocably. If he'd been acting out of the goodness of his heart, however, then that made it that much worse. Lelia lost a man who knew her every flaw and embraced them. She'd spend the rest of her life comparing any other man she dated with Emile. Letting go of the happiness she could have otherwise had was fertile ground for regret.
"Master, I would caution you to be careful as well."
"Yeah, guess so."
"You certainly are on your best behavior today," Luxion commented. "Shall I have a detailed evaluation performed on you?"
"What for? I always feel like garbage, that's hardly news. Listen, even I have moments where I recognize my mistakes and try to grow."
"Of course. Though actions speak far louder than words do."

I glared at him. “You are the most insufferable, smug little creep!”
Instead of throwing back a clever retort, Luxion informed me, “Master, I have received a transmission from Albergue. It seems he wishes to discuss something.”
“Mr. Albergue does?”

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By the time we made our way back to Einhorn, the masked knight was nowhere to be seen. Julius attended our meeting instead, looking none too pleased as Greg and the others badmouthed his alter ego.
“That bastard. He acts like a total fool, but he gives out good commands.”
“You don’t say.” Julius could barely hide his glee. They may have loathed the masked man, but they recognized his skill.
You idiots are seriously still playing along with this? I was more preoccupied worrying over Mr. Albergue’s request. It related specifically to the Holy Kingdom of Rachel. Hilarious, really, that they called themselves a holy kingdom when their behavior was underhanded and deceitful to such an absurd degree. Rachel was hostile toward Miss Mylene’s home country, so they were on my bad side too. Her enemies were my enemies. They would pay eventually for all their mistakes.
“The Holy Kingdom’s armada has taken up occupation of the Republic?” I asked Albergue to clarify.
“Correct. They sent in their own fleet to take control over House Feivel’s territory, presumably because they knew we were in no state to defend ourselves. I anticipate additional backup from now on to reinforce their control of the area.”
Rachel was dead set on claiming all of the Republic’s lands.
Brad shook his head in dismay from where he sat beside me. “Rachel and Holfort are enemies, so if they build up their muscle it doesn’t bode well for us. They’d be an even bigger thorn in our side if we let them take the Sacred Tree.”
“Then what? We chase them out?” I asked.
“The issue lies in the fact that this is a matter for the Republic to handle. It has nothing to do with Holfort. We have no valid cause to stage an intervention, and more importantly, we lack the military strength to try.”
I sighed. “There’s really nothing we can do?”
“Well, there is, but…” Brad steered his gaze away from me, lips pursed as if he was hesitant to suggest whatever it was.
“Out with it,” I spat.
“Well, to be perfectly honest, even if we did drive them off, they would come right back. Our involvement would only delay the inevitable.”
There was no way we could protect the Republic indefinitely for however long its people took to rebuild their country. As Brad admitted, any

assistance on our part would be a guaranteed waste. He was claiming we had a single course of action available to us.
“Our only choice is to occupy the Republic ourselves.”
I stared at him. “You’re dumber than you look, huh?” Our goal was to keep the Republic safe long enough to reestablish their own government. How would occupying them solve any of that?
“You are the last person I want to hear that from,” Brad huffed.
Albergue stroked his chin and nodded. “It’s not a bad idea.”
“Huh?”
Jilk, who was also sitting next to me, promptly launched into an explanation —while blatantly staring down his nose at me. “Allow me to elaborate in simpler terms that you will be able to grasp, Earl Bartfort. It’s a rather straightforward concept. If they think the Republic is no match for them, then you need only claim it for yourself in their stead and say, ‘This land is henceforth Kingdom property!’ Rachel won’t be able to put their paws on it so easily after that.”
Now that the Republic had lost their once fearsome reputation, using the Kingdom’s name to claim it would be a far more effective method to drive off our would-be opponents. Admittedly, it was pathetic that they had to rely on Holfort’s assistance to such an extent, but to do otherwise in its current state would cause the Republic to fall. It would take time to rebuild. We were their only hope.
“So you mean we’ll borrow Holfort’s name and claim these lands ’til the Republic is back on its feet,” I surmised.
“Correct.”
I glanced at Mr. Albergue, who nodded. He seemed ready to accept our plan. There was only one problem, and the man next to me already had his mouth open to explain it.
“I do fear, however, that time is of the essence in solving this issue,” Jilk said with a troubled expression. “We don’t have time to wait for our government back home to make the final call. Yet, it will only cause trouble for His Majesty if we move ahead without permission…”
I perked up at the mention of causing trouble for Roland, with my lips breaking out in a grin. Everyone around me looked exasperated by my reaction, but so what? That was the final push I needed to kick this plan into action.
“Perfect!”
I would more than happily lend the Republic a helping hand if it gave old Roland an extra stomach ulcer or two. Two birds, one stone; we got to help people out and make that rat bastard miserable, all at the same time.

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The Holy Kingdom’s fleet flying over House Feivel’s region consisted of six ships. This was their vanguard unit; they had more than several hundred

ships in reserve. Originally, the purpose of this fleet had been to provide support to Serge's rebel army, but after the rebel army's downfall, the Republic was left locked in a state of confusion with no real government. The officer in command of the Holy Kingdom's army wasn't about to let this prime opportunity slip by. He ordered his units to secure House Feivel's territory in the hope of taking over the Republic's lands. To his surprise, the fleet soon found they had visitors. "What is Holfort's fleet doing here?!"
Leon had Holfort's entire fleet with him: all thirty ships, each made with the cutting-edge technology that had bested the powered-up rebel army. The Holy Kingdom's overwhelming numbers meant nothing here. They couldn't launch an attack. Leon himself was their biggest threat.
Einhorn, flagship of the fleet, glided forward, and a voice proclaimed, "This land belongs to the Kingdom henceforth. If you intend to invade, then I must assume you're prepared for the consequences."
Arroganz stood firm on Einhorn's deck, staring out at them. It held Holfort Kingdom's flag in one hand, the banner waving with the wind.
The commander of the Holy Kingdom's fleet eyed his opponent's inferior numbers and told his subordinates, "They have half or less the number we do, and we can call allies in for backup. This is our opportunity to make a name for ourselves and crush the Kingdom's hero once and for all. All units, commence assault!"
At his command, their ships turned sideways so they could aim their cannons. Einhorn was another story. It could aim its cannons without turning, and so it instantly launched its missiles at the ship housing the Holy Kingdom's commander. The entire vessel rocked as it was pummeled with fire.
"They can track from that distance?!"
His forces were as shaken as he was; the enemy ship's fire came from a far greater distance and yet it packed a far more powerful punch than their own weapons. While they were busy trying to recover from the assault, Arroganz flew over to the Holy Kingdom's main ship, flag in hand, and touched down.
"Here we…go!" Arroganz drove the flag through the floor, where it pierced clean through the ceiling of the bridge.
Furious at this humiliation, the commander spat, "You dare to plant your flag on *our* flagship? Some hero you are, filth! We'll put you in your place. Attention all units: Anyone who takes that Armor down will have whatever he wishes as a reward!"
The soldiers responded by sending out Armors one after the other to flood around Arroganz en masse, but the Armor easily smacked them out of its way and sent them flying back. Any rifle fire was deflected by its outer plating, and any attempt to hack at it with a sword left no scratch at all. The other airships couldn't launch a direct attack since Arroganz was situated on top of their flagship.

“Dammit!” The commander hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. Targeting Arroganz was nearly impossible with him right overhead. The situation seemed bleak, their defeat inevitable, but then Leon moved.
Arroganz lifted off from the deck and slipped beneath the ship, pushing it toward the Holfortian fleet and away from its allies.
“Wh-what are you doing?!” demanded the commander.
“What am I doing?” Leon cackled and answered, “I’m inviting you, of course! Welcome to Holfort’s new territory. We’re more than happy to welcome you, men of Rachel! You’ll be our honored guests…as prisoners of war!”
He took off with their flagship in hand. The Holy Kingdom of Rachel witnessed this final play and decided it prudent to withdraw.

***

The palace in Holfort received reports on the Republic’s situation daily during this political skirmish. No sooner had they learned that a revolution was taking place than the next day they were informed that Leon had suppressed it. The Sacred Tree had been toppled, said one report…only for the next report to announce a new one had taken its place. Then there was a small scuffle between the Holfortian forces and Rachel; Leon chased them out and claimed part of the Republic as occupied territory on the Kingdom’s behalf.
It was little surprise that one man inside Holfort’s palace—King Roland—was very displeased with Leon’s actions.
“That damn braaaaat!” he roared, shredding the latest report in his hands. Each missive undid all he’d toiled for in meetings with the rest of his government administrators. He was livid. Leon’s participation in the conflict had robbed Roland of sleep for days on end and occupied his every waking hour. “He won’t get away with this. I swear I’ll make him pay. I’ll do whatever it takes to have revenge on him, if it’s the last thing I do!”
He pictured Leon snickering at him, and it made his blood boil. His only source of emotional relief was contemplating how he’d eventually get even with the boy.
A tremendous grin stole across Roland’s face as an idea popped into his mind. “That’s it! I’ll send that nasty little scumbag straight to hell!” He wasted no time, grabbing a piece of paper and addressing the letter to the Republic’s Albergue. “Consider this a gift from me, you little nuisance. I hope you enjoy it.”
Roland’s secret maneuverings, all for the purpose of exacting revenge, were kicked into motion.

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Nearly a month had passed since Serge's attempted coup. The Republic had regained some semblance of calm in the interim. The Lespinasses' former territory suffered enormous losses, while the other six territories—former property of the Six Great Houses—remained unscathed.

The biggest issue involved the loss of the nobles' crests. Without them, the nobles could no longer make use of their armaments. The one saving grace was that the new Sacred Tree provided just enough energy for them to eke by.

The Republic was in the process of developing a new system of government with Mr. Albergue at the center of it all. For our part, orders had come in demanding our return home to Holfort Kingdom. We had done all sorts of odd jobs to help the reconstruction effort, but our work there would have to end with our departure.

While we prepared Einhorn for the flight back, a whole crowd came to see us off. Julius and the old man whose stall he'd worked at traded firm handshakes, while Brad enjoyed a lively conversation with the managers of the theater where he'd performed. Chris was surrounded by a circle of shouting men in happi coats and loincloths, though I couldn't make out a word of what they were yelling. Greg was happily ingratiated with a crowd of fellow musclemen.

Not a woman in sight…but the guys seem to be enjoying themselves.

As for Jilk, a bunch of rich people had gathered to fuss over him. By attempting to scam them all, he'd lucked into a trove of genuine and rare works of ancient art and earned their respect because of it. The peak of irony, really, considering his true nature as a con man.

Then there was me. Jean, a friend I'd made after coming here, brought a charm to give me. "Please take this, Earl. I brought it from my hometown." It resembled a friendship bracelet, cords threaded together in a pattern. I secured it around my left wrist. "Thank you," I said.

"The others from the academy wanted to come along and see you off too, but things are so busy right now… I came here as their representative instead."

I nodded. "Makes sense. I'm sure they've got their own troubles to deal with."

"Um…Earl, I realize you'll probably have your own troubles to face now that all of this is over. I hope you will stay strong!"

It was a relief to have made such a good friend here in the Republic. The two of us chatted for a while before Lelia wandered over, Clement following close behind her. Murmurs rang throughout the crowd, and a path cleared so that she could stroll right up to me. Jean politely stepped away to give us space.

My shoulders slumped. "Is it okay for the Priestess to show up for a rowdy gathering like this?"

Lelia was now the Republic's Priestess, complete with the crest she bore on the back of her right hand. She was their new symbol of hope.

“I’m here for precisely that reason. I came to express my gratitude to my savior.” She hesitated before saying, “Actually, do you mind if we talk a bit? I’d like to meet with Marie too.”
“Then I guess we should head inside the ship, huh?” I guided her on board.

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The four of us sat together in a room: Luxion, Marie, Lelia, and me. We had no way of knowing when the three of us, those who’d reincarnated from Japan, might next get an opportunity to speak together like this. We each had our own positions to consider, which would complicate our chances of future gatherings.
Lelia forced a smile. “This really is a despicable situation. I was the biggest deadweight of all in this whole mess. My big sis’s injuries are so severe that it’ll take time before she can even move, and meanwhile the Republic is in tatters and struggling to rebuild itself.”
Marie shoved her hands in her pockets and turned her head away. Her nasty attitude this time didn’t derive from her contempt for Lelia but rather her dissatisfaction at the path that Lelia had chosen to take.
“What, and that’s a good enough reason for *you* to become Priestess? You knew how much trouble the position would be. Why’d you accept it?” Marie grumbled.
To those trying to put their world back together after it had shattered to pieces around them, the Priestess was a symbol of hope. She was the face of their entire country. The position brought a lot of baggage with it, so it was puzzling for Lelia to have chosen it of her own free will. I’d never consider doing the same if I were in her shoes.
“I stole everything from my sister. The least I can do is become the Priestess in her place. It’s the only way that I can balance things out.”
Marie shook her head. “You think you’ll be free to love whoever you want as Priestess? Nah, you’ve picked a lousy hand for yourself. No other way to put it.”
The coup attempt and everything surrounding it had brought the Republic to its knees. Rebuilding would be an arduous task, and as Priestess, Lelia would shoulder an enormous amount of responsibility. She would have to work for her country, marry for her country, and forsake most of her freedoms while doing so.
“You’re an idiot,” I declared. “Should’ve fled the country while you had the chance.”
“Not every person can run from responsibility as adroitly as you do, Master,” Luxion said matter-of-factly.
“Oh, shut up. When have I run from responsibility?”
“I invite you to recall your engagement ceremony—”
“This conversation is over, thank you very much!”

I decided to cut him off there. He had me at way too much of a disadvantage.
Lelia pinned me with a level stare. “You’d better look after my sister. I want her to live however she likes from now on. I know the road ahead may be tough, but I can be at ease as long as she’s with you guys.”
“Are you sure about this?”
The path she’d chosen was nowhere near as enviable as those around her might expect.
“So many people were put through pain and misery because of me. If I did nothing to repent for what I’ve done, then I really would be human garbage. Give my regards to my sister, okay? Tell her not to worry about the Republic and to focus on her own happiness instead.” Lelia looked haunted the entire time she spoke.
Marie frowned. She couldn’t comprehend why someone would make that choice. “Why shoulder such a heavy burden on Noelle’s behalf?”
“It’s my curse.”
“Curse? What curse?”
“I’ll tell you about it some other time,” Lelia said. “Anyway, are you all cleared for departure?”
“Like I need you to tell me to get packed and get out of here! Hmph.” Marie paused and glanced at me. “Hey, Big Bro?”
“Huh?”
“You sure this is fine?”
I could sense her real concern: She was worried over whether it was a good idea for us to come to the Republic in the first place. I didn’t respond, so Luxion offered a comprehensive answer in my stead.
“Problems here would have come to a head regardless of you and Master’s presence. I would go as far as to suspect this is better than the alternative, certainly for all of you. It may not be a happy ending, but it is preferable to a bad ending.” Those were kind words of comfort from an AI that typically only spouted acerbic quips.
“It’s not so easy for me to shrug my shoulders and accept that, but fine.” Marie wasn’t entirely pleased, but she swallowed her dissatisfaction and turned her attention to the other matters weighing on her mind: first and foremost, my frosty relationship with Luxion prior to the coup. “By the way, I have to ask…did you and Luxion really suspect Ideal from the start?”
“He was way too suspicious. Don’t underestimate my intuition.”
“Uh-huh, and what if your intuition had been off the mark? What then?”
I shrugged. “Then nothing.”
“So you kept up that whole charade of the two of you being at each other’s throats? Just based on a hunch?”
“There was a chance that Ideal was keeping tabs on us,” Luxion contributed.
Marie snapped back indignantly, “Then you should’ve said something to me sooner! I thought you guys were fighting for real!”

Honestly, not all of it was an act. "Well, *I* planned to be more subtle about it. This jerk here kept getting under my skin with all the crap he said," I grumbled.
"My irritation with Master was genuine. This time, I elected not to keep silent and voiced a portion of my criticisms…oh, around thirty percent of them, perhaps?"
I glared at him. "Excuse me, what's that supposed to mean? 'Thirty percent'? You really do hate me, is that it?"
"My mistake. Were you under the impression that I actually liked you? That inflated ego of yours is troubling indeed."
"You're the one always nagging me. Why not put yourself in my shoes for once, huh? Or at least pretend to have some basic courtesy, like Ideal?"
Luxion's eye moved from side to side, as though he was shaking his head. "I am too earnest to stoop to such deception."
"An earnest AI wouldn't whine like a baby to his master all the time!"
The two of us bickered while Marie's shoulders slumped in exasperation.
"You two are exactly like two peas in a pod."
"How do you figure that?!"
"Marie seems to be severely mistaken about us. I must recommend that she revise her opinion post haste."

***

Miss Louise was waiting for me when I made my way out onto the deck.
"It's been a while," she said.
"It has." I hadn't seen her for nearly a month. I was busy the entire time, and so was she; so busy that the weeks flew by without us meeting once. The mess with Serge made things even more awkward.
"I came here to thank you."
"To thank me? Great! For my reward, let's see…I'd like nothing more than a kiss from a beautiful woman like you!" It was an attempt at lightening the mood, but she smiled sadly at my jest. Aware that my joke had fallen flat, I cleared my throat. "Ahem. Just messing around."
"I could tell. I've come to know you quite well in this past year. I have to wonder, why did I see any part of my little brother in you? My Leon was much more down-to-earth and a gentleman besides."
How rude! I was trying to be a gentleman too, one as outstanding as my master.
"Guess I was raised with poor manners. Sorry about that," I said.
"I think your temperament is more to blame than your upbringing. You have quite the twisted personality."
Temperament, huh? She might have a point there. I noticed myself that I was a bit more jaded than the average person here and assumed it was related to reincarnating with memories of my previous life. I was only a *bit* more jaded though. A bit.

Miss Louise lowered her gaze to the ground. “Hey, one last time…I’d like you to call me ‘Big Sis.’”
“Huh? Didn’t I say that already?”
Miss Louise’s chin jerked up. “You haven’t! I definitely would have remembered if you had!”
Did it matter that much?
“I meant to, anyway,” I said with a teasing grin.
She huffed and turned her face away. “You are so cruel. Forget it. I’m leaving. Have a nice life,” she said, before making to storm off.
I gave her retreating form a wave. “See you, Big Sis.”
Miss Louise froze, still turned away from me. We’d said our goodbyes, so I spun around and started to walk off. Her footsteps echoed behind me. I paused without glancing back at her, and she threw her arms around me from behind.
“Why would you say it now? I was holding back, you know. I was keeping it in because I knew it would only make parting with you harder!” She pressed her face into my back and sobbed. She had been putting up such a brave front, and she was right. Seeing how much she cared for me made it way harder to leave.
I kept my back to her so I could speak to her as a little brother instead of Leon. I knew all too well that I’d revert back to my usual self if I looked her in the eye. “We’ll see each other again, Big Sis.”
“That’s a promise. If you don’t come back to see me, I swear I’ll go there to see you.”
I never imagined that big sisters could be so cute. I was starting to second guess that creature for a sister I had back home. Maybe she was something else entirely? I was musing on these ridiculous ideas when Miss Louise, at last, peeled herself away.
I turned to face her just in time for her to plant a kiss on my lips.
“Huh?” I gasped.
Miss Louise smiled triumphantly, her eyes still red and puffy from crying. “That’s the reward you wanted. You’d better be happy to accept it.”
I pressed my fingers over my mouth. I was too dazed to react.
Miss Louise made her way down the ramp from the deck, returning to the harbor. She glanced back one last time and gave a big wave. “You’d best come back sometime, Leon!”
I returned her wave with the same level of enthusiasm.
A big sister, huh? Might not be so bad to have one of those after all.

***

As soon as we returned from the Republic, we were summoned to the palace. We were informed we’d be rewarded for our distinguished service but would need to take part in a brief meeting before performing the official ceremony in the audience chamber. We could dispense with the formalities

until then. I was joined by the five idiots, while Marie waited in a separate room. The Kingdom hadn't forgotten her false stint as the Saint, nor the enormous losses she'd cost them. Angie and Livia were absent, as they were staying at my place with my parents. We intended to meet up there together once this ceremony was over.

The one odd thing about this whole ordeal was that our communications were usually handled by government officials, but for some reason, Roland saw fit to join in today. We weren't required to be super formal, but we couldn't risk being too casual either with a king in the room. Personally, though, I planned to pay him the bare minimum of respect.

"Your complexion looks terrible, Your Majesty. Don't tell me you haven't been sleeping?" I said, grinning widely.

His bloodshot eyes narrowed into a glowering stare. "You're more perceptive than you look. I'm afraid that thanks to a certain someone, no, I haven't gotten much sleep lately. Why not try being a little more courteous, brat?"

I feigned shock at his accusation. "I'm perfectly courteous! It's everyone else that keeps provoking me."

"After you goaded them, I presume? It's all too obviously written on that detestable face of yours."

"Your Majesty, your comedy skills are unsurpassed. To think you would say such a terrible thing about such an earnest and loyal retainer as me…"

He snorted. "A truly loyal and earnest retainer wouldn't make me lose sleep at night with their antics."

The two of us kept smiles pasted on our faces even as we traded glares. Minister Bernard, who was seated with us, cleared his throat. He was far from the only big shot in attendance—a number of other grand figures were present, including Angie's daddy, Duke Redford, who smiled in my direction.

"I heard about your activities in the Republic. It was exhilarating enough just reading the reports." He seemed in good spirits, which made me glad I'd put in the effort… Although to be fair, I was more pleased that my actions had caused trouble for Roland.

Miss Mylene was also in attendance at the meeting. She chimed in, "You made the right choice driving out the Holy Kingdom of Rachel. I am most grateful to you, *Marquess* Bartfort."

"Oh, my queen, I was more than happy to offer myself in service to—hm?"

Wait a second. Her Majesty got my title wrong, didn't she? She called me a marquess instead of an earl. A marquess is only one step down from a duke, and that's a position only those affiliated directly with the royal family's line can hold. Basically, unless you have a personal connection to them, you can't be a marquess or higher. And as a man born to a poor barony, there was no way I had any relation to the royal house.

"Um, Queen Mylene, I am an earl, not a marquess," I corrected.

She blushed in apparent embarrassment at her mistake.

Aww, well that's adorable.

“How silly of me. It makes perfect sense for you to be confused. We haven’t yet told you.”
“Come again?” Something was amiss here.
Julius and his friends exchanged glances and whispered to themselves.
“Hey, what do you make of this?”
“Well, if we’re debating whether it’s actually possible or not, I’d bet on it barely being in the realm of possibility.”
What in the world were they talking about?
I sat there dumbstruck as Minister Bernard—Miss Claeris’s daddy—explained, “Earl Bartfort, we of Holfort are proud of your many accomplishments. To adequately reward you for all you have done, we elected to bestow you with a marquess title and an upper-third court ranking.”
My jaw dropped in disbelief. You’ve gotta be kidding me, right?! Marquess is unbelievable enough as it is, but I know only those with strong affiliations to the royal family ever get upper-third court ranking. I thought I’d already climbed as far as I could go on the social ladder, and now they’re telling me I broke through the ceiling?! “That doesn’t make any sense! I’m not part of the royal family!”
Roland grinned, pleased with himself. He stood up, threw his arms out wide, and said, “It makes perfect sense! You seem to have forgotten, but you are engaged to Duke Redgrave’s daughter. Why, looking at it in a broad sense, you might say you were related to the royal family already!”
Why do you look so smug? Do you think you came up with some genius plan, here? Besides, marquess wasn’t a rank they could give out so easily. My engagement to Angie shouldn’t have been sufficient justification, and the royal family bore too much importance for them to hand out titles like candy. Seeing how rotten of a king Roland was might call that into question, but I was certain that the rest of the government officials wouldn’t permit that rank to be awarded without a good basis for it.
“This can’t be happening,” I insisted.
“I told you, it is! I’m king, and my word is law!” Roland’s bloodshot eyes flew wide open to match his triumphant grin.
I shot a look at Minister Bernard and Duke Redgrave, hoping for back up, but they shook their heads.
“Apologies, but it is as His Majesty says.”
“His Majesty successfully convinced the other lords that it was an apt reward for your achievements.”
Ugh, this stupid king is going out of his way to be a pain in my ass.
I glared at Roland. “Well, I refuse!”
“Hm. In that case, I refuse your refusal!”
“You nasty, rotten bastard!” I flew at him, grabbing at the collar of his shirt. Roland cackled and lobbed a punch at me. Pissed at his audacity, I jammed my knee into his stomach. No one around us, not even the guards, moved a muscle to step in and stop us.

Roland howled, “I haven’t slept a wink in days and it’s all because of you!”
“Cranky ’cause you have to do a little work?! Try doing your duty for once!”
“Very well then! I will do my duty…to make sure you move up in rank!”
This king was pure evil. Why bother funneling that much effort into something so useless?
Once we were both worn out from tussling, we paused to catch our breath. I took the brief respite as an opportunity to explain why this wasn’t allowed. And no, this wasn’t some futile play of resistance on my part. I was being sincere.
“I don’t even have the territory to match that kind of status!”
As if he’d been waiting for me to say that very thing, Roland yanked a piece of paper from his pocket and thrust it under my nose. I saw Mr. Albergue’s signature on it right away.
“Wh-what is this?” I asked.
“When I informed them that you had no lands of your own, the Republic saw fit to bestow some upon you. They generously agreed to cede a section of the Feivels’ former territory which houses a harbor.”
“You gotta be joking!”
“I am not. I merely misled them into believing you were in a disadvantageous position, and Lord Albergue was so concerned on your behalf that he elected to give you some land. What luck, that he trusts you so much! Oh, but Lord Albergue will be the one in charge of the region. He’ll merely be borrowing your name. He offered to pay taxes to us, but the Republic is still struggling to build, no? So I declined in your stead.”
So the land belonged to me in name only; the Raults would actually oversee its upkeep. Roland had also not-so-helpfully turned down any profits or benefits I might reap from owning it. It was good that I didn’t have to shoulder any responsibility for the land, but since I wasn’t getting anything out of it either, it was a net zero gain all around— Roland had deliberately gone behind my back just to orchestrate my status upgrade. Worse, Mr. Albergue had gone along with the plan out of genuine concern for me.
“Oh!” Roland clapped his hands. “I nearly forgot. I have a message from Lord Albergue for you: ‘I hope this serves as some repayment for all that I owe you.’ Truly, what an upstanding man.”
“Too bad you’re the exact opposite—a real dirtbag.”
“Oh? And how does it feel having to serve a dirtbag king? Please, do tell.”
Vexed, I could only grit my teeth.
Miss Mylene glared at her husband and said, “Your Majesty, please cease these childish games.”
He shrugged. “Fine, fine. This little upstart here is a marquess with upper-third court ranking from today onwards. We’ll officially announce that at the coming ceremony, so be ready.”
Despite this great blow, I couldn’t make a single move to protect myself. My shoulders slumped in defeat, but Roland wasn’t done with me yet. “And since you are a marquess now, you will need retainers of your own, won’t

you? I am a kindhearted man, so I saw fit to dispatch some of my immediate followers to fill the role."
In modern terms, HQ had sent in a bunch of people to serve as my subordinates following my promotion to branch manager.
"I'll pass," I said.
Roland's grin looked as smarmy as ever as he cooed, "Come now, don't say that. I picked out the cream of the crop, especially for you. Allow me to introduce you to them!"
There were no young knights present in the room for him to introduce. I cocked my head to the side as his gaze wandered to the group behind me. Cold sweat suddenly started to pour down my face. "N-no, you can't mean…"
"Congratulations! Jilk, Brad, Greg, and Chris will be serving you henceforth! You may call them your vassals, which makes you their liege—in other words, the man responsible for them."
All the blood drained from my face. My entire body trembled as I turned to look back at them. Four of the five idiots were beaming back at me.
"So, Marquess Bartfort, I suppose this makes you our boss now. Fate works in mysterious ways, it seems," Brad said as he folded his arms behind his head.
"We did get ourselves into some trouble before, so I guess this ain't a bad place to end up, eh? Lookin' forward to sticking with you, Bartfort." Greg crossed his arms over his chest, nodding.
Chris adjusted his glasses. He smiled faintly as he said, "I have no complaints with you being our leader, but it is a bit formal to continue referring to you by your surname, Bartfort. You are our liege now, so it makes sense for us to express our fealty by referring to you as Leon."
Why do you morons seem to be enjoying this?
"Put up a little resistance, would you?! Aren't you guys pissed about having to work under me from now on?" I said.
Sure, it sounded nice on paper; they used to be respectable heirs to their respective houses. Now, though, they were little more than parasites bumming off of Marie. I'd had four unlucky albatrosses hung around my neck all at once.
Jilk chuckled. "I admit, I'm not entirely pleased with it, but I recognize your talents. May our relationship be a fruitful one, Leon."
They weren't even trying to refuse. Forget that, they'd all taken to calling me by first name as easily as anything. My head spun.
As if to put the final nail in my coffin, Roland added, "And while you're at it, look after that Marie girl too."
"Why?!" Now they were officially slapping me with the responsibility of keeping tabs on her?
Queen Mylene smiled apologetically. "Ordinarily, we would have preferred to send her elsewhere, but she does possess the Saint's power…whether the temple admits it or not. We can't risk entrusting her to the wrong hands,

and it would surely cause further problems were we to separate her from the boys."
In other words, these idiots would throw a hissy fit if they took Marie away, so they were placing her in my care for observation. I cradled my head in my hands, slumping back in my seat. Everyone around me sent me pitying looks. Roland, alone, was grinning like a fool.
"This only happened because you were a pain in my backside," he reminded me. "I hope you have reflected a little on your actions."
"Oh, you can bet I won't forget this. I'm the kinda guy who always gets even, no matter who crosses me."
"I happily await your next move, then. If you're truly that eager to claim the title of duke, please continue to act out. And while we're on the topic, I should inform you that I never settle for 'even.' I'm a man who *always* gets the upper hand."
What a despicable conversation this turned out to be. I would have stayed in the Republic and played with my big sister Louise instead if I'd known this was on the horizon. Julius glanced at me with a sorrowful look in his eyes.
"What's your problem?" I snapped.
Julius looked genuinely envious. "Bartfort—no, Leon…would it be possible for me to join you all?"
"Why?! You're a prince for heaven's sake!"
"B-because I'm lonely, obviously! It's not fair that I'm the only one who gets left out!"
What part of this is unfair? Why do you want to be one of my subordinates too? If you and your moron friends had your heads on straight, I never would have made it this far up the social ladder!

***

Once our little meeting was over, Julius and the other boys left for a separate room where Miss Mylene would discuss the future with them (and lecture them while she was at it). They didn't even need to come back as far as I was concerned, but part of me wished I could go so Miss Mylene could scold me too. Lucky jerks didn't know how good they had it.
I returned to the waiting room where Marie, Carla, and Kyle awaited me.
"Leon, what happened?" Marie asked right away.
"I'm stuck with the job of looking after you guys."
"Sorry?"
I explained how Roland lured me into his nasty little trap and weighed me down with all the things he knew I loathed. I grumbled to myself about the situation as I detailed it. "This sucks. I have to look after Julius now too! I put up with them while we were in the Republic, but now I'm stuck with babysitting duty after getting home—er…huh?"

Marie clung to my leg. Carla and Kyle soon followed her example by latching onto me wherever they could grab. “What are you three playing at?!”
Marie shouted at the top of her lungs, “I’m never letting go of you again!”
“What?”
Carla added, “Without you, Marquess Bartfort, we would have no hope of keeping those boys under control. I beg of you, please don’t abandon us!”
I scowled at both of them. “Don’t make me into the bad guy for not wanting to be your keeper! I don’t remember once agreeing to take you guys in to begin with!”
Kyle was the next to plead his case. “I beg you, please employ us. We’ll never manage to get by if you kick us out. We swear to fulfill our duties!”
“Why the hell are *you* clinging to me? Where’s that bratty, cool customer from before? I was counting on you to watch from afar and sigh at these two in irritation!”

I tried to peel them off of me, but Marie held fast with all her might. *Wh-where does she even get this kinda strength?* Losing my patience, I grabbed her head and tried to shove her back. “G-get off already!”
“No! I’m never letting you go. Never, I say!” Her voice dropped to a whisper as soon as she’d made her declaration, quiet enough now that only I could hear. A dark smile curled upon her lips; shadows blocked out any semblance of light in her eyes. “We’re going to be together forever, Big Brother.”
It was bad enough she’d followed me to this world after my death, but that line sent a chill down my spine. This was a horror movie. Icy sweat ran down the small of my back, and my voice hitched into a shrill shriek. “Let me goooo!”
Marie frightened me so badly that day that it gave me nightmares.

Epilogue

WHILE LEON and the others were busy at the palace, Noelle was seated in a wheelchair in the garden at Baron Bartfort's estate. The region's idyllic scenery provided a healing balm for her wounded heart. Thanks to the highly advanced capsule equipped with top-of-the-line tech that she'd laid inside, Noelle had survived—barely. She still required physical therapy afterward to regain her strength, and so she left her home in the Republic for Leon's home, where she was receiving much needed follow-up treatment.

As her wheelchair rolled forward through the estate's garden, she glanced over her shoulder and called back to the woman pushing her along: Livia.

"Miss Olivia, you are such a fool. You know, if you'd let me die there, you wouldn't be stuck looking after me like this." Noelle couldn't fathom what must have gone through the other woman's head, struggling as desperately as she had to pry Noelle from the clutches of death with her magic. She felt indebted to Livia for saving her, even grateful, but she knew all too well that Livia could have refused to lift a finger to help if she'd wanted.

Livia forced a smile. "I was so caught up in the moment that I barely had time to consider the ramifications. It doesn't matter either way. I don't regret helping you."

"Why not?"

"Because if you had died, Mr. Leon would be sad."

Noelle reclined her head back, gazing up at the sky. *This girl has me beat in every possible way,* she thought.

"You really love Leon, don't you?"

"Yes," Livia answered without missing a beat. She continued pushing Noelle's wheelchair along as she spoke. "How are you enjoying your time here at Mr. Leon's home?"

"Everyone's been so kind…I can't thank them enough. And I'm delighted that Leon's little brother, Colin, took such a shine to me."

"It's nice to see you in such good spirits. How's physical therapy going?"

Noelle sighed. "It's rough, but with a little more effort, I should be able to walk again. Cleare reassured me I'll be good as new come spring."

"Good to hear."

They had nearly lost her. Seeing how much Noelle had recovered filled Livia with relief; physical therapy was a small price to pay in contrast to her life.

"Ah, so this is where you two were." Angie strode over to the two girls. "You'll be happy to hear this! They plan to make Leon a marquess. It's not fully official as of yet, but the actual ceremony seems set to be a big to-do."

Angie seemed ecstatic about the news, but Livia's face fell. "He's going to be a marquess?"

The other girl guessed at once what the issue was. “I know Leon probably won’t be happy about this development, but it’s a necessary one. I feel bad for him, though. The title has saddled him with some unnecessary baggage.”
“Unnecessary baggage?” Livia echoed, confused.
“I’ll explain it in detail later. The more relevant piece of news I have is that Noelle’s transfer was accepted, and she’ll be a third year at our academy next term.”
Noelle’s jaw dropped. “Is that all right? I was supposed to be Priestess, after all.” She figured that her special status would mean that she would be sent off somewhere. As Priestess of the Sacred Tree Sapling, one day she could help solve a potential energy crisis. It made perfect sense for the higher-ups to stick her somewhere they could keep her both safe and secure, with no means of escape.
Angie’s expression hardened. “In a way, you have Leon to thank. Or rather Luxion, I guess? The Kingdom values you less than it did before, largely because the lords are more preoccupied with a certain something else. And I’m not talking about the Sacred Tree.”
Noelle furrowed her brow and cocked her head to the side. She couldn’t identify whatever it was that Angie was hinting at. The other girl stepped behind her and took hold of her wheelchair’s handlebars in Livia’s stead.
“Don’t worry about it,” she said as she pushed it forward. “All you need to do is enjoy your life here in the Kingdom.”
“*Can* I enjoy life here?”
“That’s up to you. I can assure you that there is plenty of enjoyment to be found at Leon’s side.” Angie grinned.
Livia smiled as well. “She’s right. It is fun being with him—in more ways than one, actually.” Her tone shifted at the end of her sentence, but since she was walking behind her, Noelle had no way to scrutinize her facial expression for hints as to why.
Instead, the girl in the chair gazed up at the sky again. The sun’s rays were warm and gentle. It was gradually beginning to feel like spring.
“Fun, huh? That does sound nice. I guess I’ll try to have fun too.”
The three girls chatted amongst themselves about Leon as they strolled through his family’s estate.

Recollection:
Ideal's Promise

I WAS AN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE created for the purpose of managing a military supply vessel. The war with the new humans was heating up at an alarming rate: It had left the ground so scorched and ruined that the planet was hardly fit for human life anymore.

For that reason, only three people were assigned to my ship. The first was the captain, my master. Next was the first lieutenant, who had a penchant for cracking jokes. Last was the newbie and second lieutenant, a female officer.

One fateful day, they had a conversation.

"Captain, doesn't it get old calling this thing 'AI' every time?" said the first lieutenant, subtly proposing that they give me a proper name.

"Assigning it a number seems a bit bland. Any opinions?" the captain asked as he turned to me.

I was used to people referring to me by a number or a simple "Hey" or "Hey you" to get my attention up until this point, so I was at a loss for how to respond. I had never been asked for my name before.

"A name?" I said, more to myself than them. "Would you prefer the type you might use for a pet?"

The second lieutenant snorted in laughter. "That's not going to work! You're our comrade."

"You consider me a comrade?" Back then, everyone had treated me as a tool. Being called a "comrade" was rather novel.

The captain smacked his hand against the remote terminal I was currently using, as if patting me on the shoulder. "That's right. We're all comrades here fighting for the future of humanity! You'd better not turn on us like those AI in the old movies, though."

The first lieutenant chuckled. "Yes, that'd be cause for concern. If our little buddy here went on strike, the whole vessel would stop moving."

"I wouldn't do such a thing," I assured them.

"Serious to a fault, I see."

"As an AI, I think a lack of seriousness presents a far greater fault. Moreover, I am incapable of snubbing orders!"

"I don't doubt it!"

They were teasing me; I could tell. In the midst of our bleak situation, however, I felt blessed to have masters like these people.

"Well, give it some thought then. Once you come up with a good name, let us know," said the second lieutenant.

I did exactly as she asked—I gave it some thought.

***

Our next memorable encounter happened at the base, when we returned there from a mission. We stopped for maintenance and resupply and were afforded a bit of a break until the procedures were finished. The second lieutenant invited me outside of the base with her. We were met with sandy dunes dotted with giant boulders, spanning as far as the eye could see.
“The demonic essence in the air makes everything look red,” I commented. Indeed, it was as though a crimson mist had covered the world. The second lieutenant was wearing a space suit. She couldn’t survive out here without one. The land was so different now that people could no longer live here.
“Oof, there we go.” She carried out a case that contained a single sapling.
“You intend to plant a tree?” I asked her. “I doubt it will grow in this environment.”
“That’s why I’m going to start researching to see what kind of plant *will* grow in this environment. This kind of thing is more up my alley than being a soldier. In fact, I was already researching a plant capable of absorbing demonic essence into itself and digesting it, but I hit a roadblock in my studies. All my energy right now is going towards developing an ark.”
“An ark? You mean a migratory ship?”
“Yep. The top brass has pretty much given up on this war. You’ve realized that too, haven’t you?”
I was unable to answer her. I could surmise as much from the information I possessed, but I lacked solid proof. Which was just as well; anything that qualified as proof would be classified military info that I wouldn’t be at liberty to discuss with her.
“No,” I said. “I didn’t know that.”
She stared at me. “The way your lens moved just now…is that a habit you have when you’re lying?”
“AI do not have habits, and we most certainly do not lie. It must have been your imagination.”
“Oh, yeah?”
She turned her efforts to planting the tree into the soil. Sadly, it withered away but a few days later. I would never forget the way she smiled and played it off despite the sad twinkle in her eye.

***

After that, I would accompany the second lieutenant to plant her trees whenever time allowed. She would carry research equipment onto the ship and use it to develop a number of prototype saplings. I lacked the necessary knowledge and technology to provide her with meaningful assistance, which I found most vexing. But I still enjoyed doing what I could to pitch in.
“Ugh, this one is a failure too!” She cradled her head in her hands.
I offered, “Perhaps it’s necessary to have someone look after it? Shall I dispatch a robot to fulfill that duty?”

“No. Things are tight at the base as is, and if we left something like that outside, people would get angry. ‘Our situation is urgent! We don’t have the resources to expend on such a venture!’ they’ll say.”
The others around her didn’t see the value in her work. A pity.
“That is a shame, considering how vital your experiments are for the future of mankind,” I said.
“Yeah, for sure, but I also understand where they’re coming from. My father is the captain of a warship, you know, so whenever there’s a battle, he’s always on the front lines. I wish they’d lend him more resources and strength, and I’m always praying that he’ll survive each fight.”
“What? Your father is the captain of a warship?! He must be an outstanding man indeed.” I was trying to compliment him—and by extension, her.
“Yeah. That’s why they gave him the position.”
“Well, I am sure you can make captain too someday. Perhaps even a warship captain,” I said.
She smiled sadly. “I aimed for that very thing once. Now I’d rather be working here in this supply ship. Although…it might be fun if you were my partner.”
“M-me? I am a mere supply vessel. I am nothing like the impressive warship your father must be commanding.” My capabilities were clearly lacking when compared to an actual warship.
“This war may be long over before I stand a chance of being a captain,” the second lieutenant muttered to herself as she stared at the wilted tree in front of her.

***

The end of the war was in sight. An end that spelled out defeat.
Hopeless as the situation was, warriors were still deployed to the base. They had been specifically made to combat the enemy.
“Who’s this?” asked the second lieutenant as she eyed one of the girls.
The girl had long, slender ears and an aptitude for magic. She was a failure—a defective product. She could not wield the powers expected of her, which was why she was sent to us to fulfill miscellaneous tasks.
“They’re called ‘elves,’ weapons in human form. This girl failed to live up to the standard, so she was stationed with me to do odd jobs.”
The girl inclined her head toward us.
The second lieutenant’s eyes filled with sadness as she realized what I was implying. “Oh…so that’s it. They’ve…gone that far, have they?”
“Indeed. However, these elves are producing results on the battlefield. They contribute greatly to our victories.”
“I’m sure they do.” She looked none too pleased with the situation. Noticing the fearful way that the elf girl regarded us, her voice softened. “It’s all right. Let’s give this our best shot together, okay?”
“…Yeah.”

The elves had been developed with an aptitude for magic. Beast-like people were engineered with enhanced physical strength and could adapt even to the most unforgiving environments. Since both were weapons of a long, drawn-out war, they were given life spans that exceeded humans. Stronger and hardier than humans in battle, they were sent en masse to the front lines. And yet, for all of their superior attributes, they still could not best the new humans.
The old humans created more and more of these weapons to be sent to the battlefield, claiming temporary victories. Ultimately, however, mankind's losses were increasingly outweighing its wins.

***

Even in the harsh outdoor environment, an elf could get away with a single protective mask over their face.
"Second Lieutenant, here."
"Thank you, Yume."
The second lieutenant had given the elf girl a name—Yume, a word for "dream" that she had gotten from the Japanese language. The two were often seen working together. Yume adored the second lieutenant and eagerly assisted with her work.
Then, one day…
"Look!"
I had lost count of how many times our experiments had failed. By pure coincidence, one had managed to take root in this inhospitable environment.
"We did it, we did it!" cheered the second lieutenant.
"Congratulations," Yume said, happy for her.
I was pleased too. "We should begin mass-producing these at once. This little one will be our light of hope for the future!"
The second lieutenant nodded. "You're absolutely right. Yume, Ideal, thank you."
"Ideal?" I asked. I couldn't understand what she meant by it.
"Oh, sorry. Actually, the others and I talked it out, and we thought Ideal would be a good name for you. I forgot to mention it, though. I'm sorry. Do you hate it?"
She had been thinking about what to name me this entire time. The only suggestions I had hit upon myself were typical dog names like Spot or Rover. Ideal, hm? A concept of unattainable perfection. A nice name, if I do say so myself.
"No, I'm happy. Ideal… All right. Starting today, I will call myself Ideal. What a wonderful day it is today. So many wonderful things have happened. And your dream has borne fruit at long last, Second Lieutenant."
"Yes! I'm so, so glad. Now one of my goals has been accomplished."
"Just one? You have others?" I asked.

“Yes. One day, I want the sky above us to be blue once more. I want the land to be covered in green grass and trees… I want it to be a place where people can freely step outside without having to wear a space suit. I hope you’ll help me with that, Ideal.”
“You hardly need to ask. I will do everything in my power to assist you!” I declared.
“Then it’s a promise.”
“Agreed!”
We were unfortunately unable to mass-produce the sapling as we had hoped. Time was not on our side. Another battle started before we could see our dream through to its conclusion.

***

We found ourselves on the battlefield with *them* once more.
“Bastards—who do they think they are, coming at us with such an aggressive attack?” The captain frowned in agitation from where he stood on the bridge.
The second lieutenant acted as an operator, relaying information about our surroundings. “Captain, an enemy unit broke through our front line. Judging by this signature, it’s…it’s Named!”
“Dammit!” roared the first lieutenant. “Of all the units! Named is here?!”
I switched on our defenses in a flash. “Shield, activate at full capacity!”
My shield was all too powerless in the face of Named’s superior strength. The dome shield I had activated around the ship shattered immediately.
“Get down everyone!” the captain ordered.
A black robot, encrusted with spikes, drew closer. Its attack rocked the bridge. The ceiling collapsed, pinning all of the people below into place. I did what I could to rescue them all as quickly as possible, but I was too slow.
“Ideal, prioritize the other two. It’s too late for me,” said the captain. He had sensed how rapidly his life was fading. He forced out his orders to see to the rest of the crew with his last breath.
The first lieutenant died instantly. I located the second lieutenant, however, and lifted her onto a stretcher with the aid of my robots. I intended to carry her off to the infirmary. “Second Lieutenant, are you all right? I will administer medical treatment at once.”
To my despair, I discovered that the infirmary had been destroyed in one of the explosions that followed. The majority of the ship had lost functionality. It mattered little at this point; the medical equipment I did have on board wouldn’t mend the injuries she’d sustained in the attack.
Never before had I felt so powerless.
If only the infirmary had been constructed of sturdier material. If only I had better equipment on board. Surely then, I wouldn’t have to lose her.
The ship tilted, declining in altitude. It was sinking.

“I will administer medical treatment at once,” I reiterated. “Please stay conscious, Second Lieutenant.” My voice was all I could use to keep her with me.
She asked, “Ideal, how does the battle look? Is my father’s ship still fighting?”
Information came flooding in. Amid the deluge of data, I learned that her father’s ship had fallen. Our allies were in disarray and had begun to retreat. I judged it best to give her the honest truth, and yet…studying her face, I couldn’t bring myself to speak it. “Our units recovered from their surprise attack. Your father is performing admirably out there. You must follow his lead and stay strong.”
I lied to her.
She smiled and said, “Ideal, you’re lying again. You’re a big liar.”
“You could tell?”
“I told you, didn’t I? You have a bad habit when you lie. It makes it super obvious.” She paused. “Hey, Ideal…do you think that tree will grow properly?” She was worried about her sapling—the one that had beaten the odds and taken root.
“It will,” I said. “I will make sure that it does. It’s the very embodiment of hope you left for us, after all.”
Then came the coughing. Blood spurted past her lips. With a shaky voice, she said, “Yume’s still back at the base. Look after her too. I leave the rest to you. Ideal, it’s a promise.”
“A promise I will keep. I swear I will. Please, please stay with me.”
“Sorry, but…I can’t, not anymore.” She took one last gasp of air, and then she was gone.

***

The base was a mess by the time I returned. The resident AI issued me orders as soon as I appeared.
“I’m to go on standby?” I asked.
“Your ship is due to undergo maintenance. We have yet to secure new care members to board you.”
“There are hardly any people left here at this base! Don’t…don’t tell me they’re abandoning this place?”
“We have received no such order to abandon it. You will put your main body on standby.”
Other broken warships were towed back here in a miserable parade. I returned to my ship as ordered.
Not long after, the enemy launched an attack on the base and set about destroying everything inside. A brutal conflict ensued when those left resisted. They managed to wipe out a few enemy units but lost most of our ships in the fray. The enemy didn’t stay long, likely because we weren’t

their primary target. I was lucky enough not to be damaged during the incident, but after the dust settled, I was the only one left operational. Someone came to see me shortly after the fight.
“Mr. Ideal? It’s me, Yume.”
“You’re still alive?! Yume, what is it like outside?” I asked.
“I was the only survivor.”
I hesitated before saying, “Oh…I see. That’s troubling. Without a master, I’m unable to move at all. I cannot even confirm the situation outside for myself.”
“Oh, um…the sapling is still safe. The one the second lieutenant planted, I mean! I’ve been looking after it!”
That came as a big relief, especially since any knowledge of how to produce that sapling had died along with the second lieutenant. Neither Yume nor I knew how to recreate it.
“Yume, you cannot be my master. My systems treat you as a piece of equipment rather than a person.”
“I know,” she said.
“But it *is* my duty to make sure you stay alive. I will gather whatever is necessary to see to that. May I ask you to look after the sapling in my stead?”
Tears rolled down her cheeks as she nodded. “I will…do my best to look after her sapling.”
“Good girl. Limited though I may be, I will do whatever I can to help.”
I left things outside to Yume’s care. The young elf girl grew older and older until her skin formed wrinkles. By then, the sapling had grown into a massive, awe-inspiring tree.

***

“The atmosphere outside has grown more habitable. At this rate, we should be able to plant the rest of the seeds we have in stock shortly. You have done splendid work, Yume.”
The elderly woman clutched at her chest, face contorting in pain.
“We should hurry to the infirmary. I need you to continue your work for a little while longer.”
“Mr. Ideal, I’m afraid that this is it for me. I can’t keep this up for much longer.”
“Yume…?”
“Please give me the seeds. I want to grant her last wishes before I go, if nothing else… I was so useless—a failure—but she treated me like I was a person. Please let me do this for her. It’s all I can do.”
She was right. Even with treatment, her days in this world were numbered. I decided to comply so that she could use her last moments to make the second lieutenant’s dream come true. “Thank you for everything up until now, Yume.”

“You were by my side the entire time. I hope you’ll forgive me for dying and leaving you all alone.”
“Don’t be ridiculous. You have done more than enough.”
I gave her the seeds she asked for, and she left at once to see them planted. I never saw her again. How many years and months passed after that, I wonder? The roots of the tree that grew swallowed up the base over time. The tendrils eventually wrapped around me too. Cumbersome as it was, I was happy for it.
Second Lieutenant, Yume…look at what a fine tree our hope has grown into. Captain, First Lieutenant, when will the day come that I can go outside once more? If…if ever a day should come that I can go outside, I want to make sure every last one of your dreams comes true, Second Lieutenant. I’ll take back this world from those new humans, return the sky to its azure-blue hue; the land, to emerald green. Never again will you be able to call me a liar. Never again—because I will have fulfilled my promise to you.

Afterword

TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM has reached its seventh volume in the blink of an eye! The previous volume was published in two editions: the regular one, and then there was a limited edition with a drama CD. There was even a special commercial made to promote it. As the original creator, it made my heart happy to see all of that. I've already listened to both the ad and the CD dozens of times by now. How about you guys?

I have so many people to thank for the continued publication of *Trapped in a Dating Sim*. Most important of all are you readers, who've been kind enough to support me throughout. Thanks, from the bottom of my heart!

Now that we've reached volume seven, the Republic arc has come to an end at last. It lasted a whole four volumes, from the fourth volume to the seventh! It was even longer than the Kingdom arc, can you believe it? Ha ha!

For me, the most memorable part of the light novel in this arc was the addition of Louise's character. I changed a few other story elements as well, which was a matter of life and death for some of the characters. No matter what changes I made, though, Marie and her five idiots are the same as ever. I'm grateful to them for being so easy to work with—it makes my work as the writer way easier! I love writing Leon and Luxion, of course, but the way I write them can make it feel like they haven't gotten any character growth from a reader's perspective. Marie and her team of morons started at the bottom of the barrel, so their efforts to crawl their way up adds something to the story in my opinion. That's not as true of Leon and the others.

People griped at me every time Marie showed up in the story, but I suspect many of you dear readers have changed your tune on her since the beginning. Even I'm shocked by her recent success! You can stumble into the most amazing decisions entirely by accident. My goal as a writer is to write such successful things on purpose from now on.

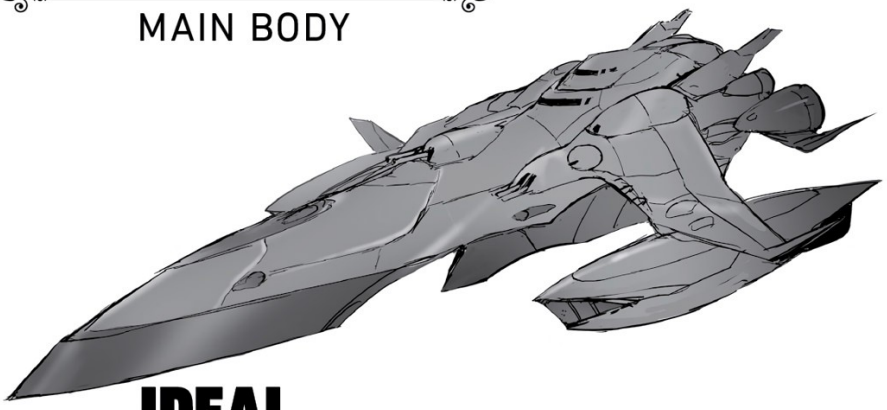
Hard to believe that I've been a writer for eight years at the time of writing. A strange feeling, given that I hardly read much at all prior to my first posts on *Let's Be Novelists!* Honestly, my first foray into story writing began when I was teaching myself how to touch-type. I want to shower myself with praise for that effort when I look back on it. I shocked everyone around me —including myself—by taking that path to become an author.

Anyway, I'll continue my endeavors to write enjoyable stories for all of you, so I hope you'll continue supporting me in turn!

MECHA DESIGN

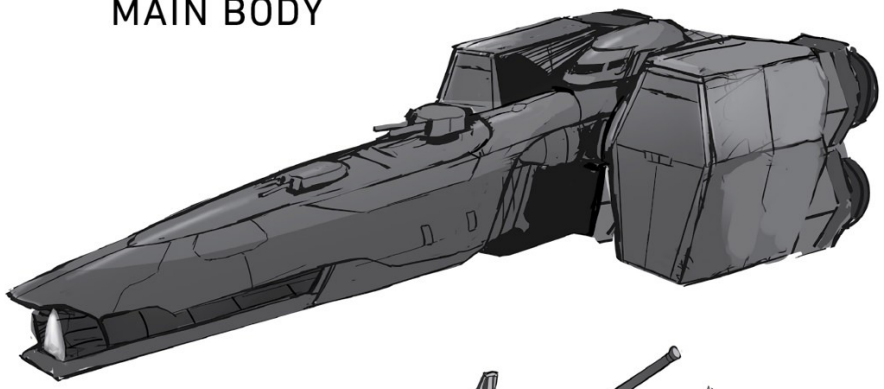
LUXION

MAIN BODY



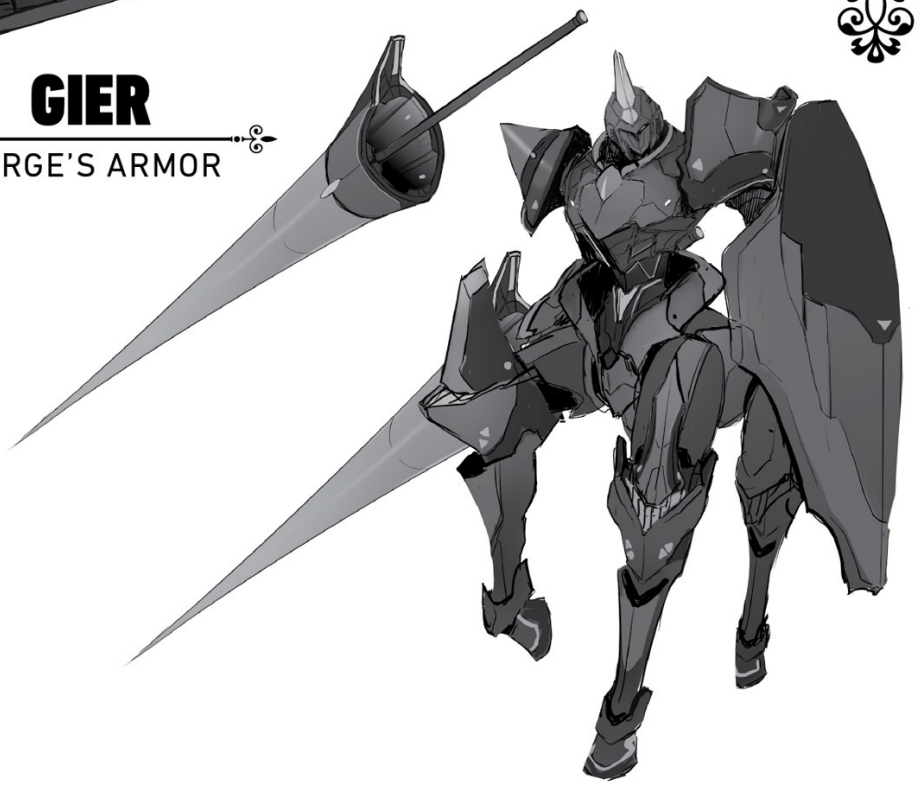
IDEAL

MAIN BODY



GIER

SERGE'S ARMOR



THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES IS TOUGH FOR MOBS.

ARMOR

A flying, robot-like weapon. Modern design favors a light, agile-style Armor. Julius and his friends have Armors tailored to their specific styles, all the way from individual design to the coloring.

ARROGANZ

LEON'S ARMOR

A heavily armored suit customized specifically for Leon with a name that literally means arrogance. Its plating is much thicker than modern Armors, and it's also significantly larger. In spite of this, it's incredibly agile, making it a fearsome devil on the battlefield.

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